

Mazruth-Kul

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Mazruth-Kul

The city of Mazruth-Kul is a sprawling, bustling metropolis, its streets alive with the clang of hammer on anvil, the hiss of steam from alchemists' flasks, and the lively hum of merchants hawking their wares. It is a city of industry and ambition, where every alleyway hides an opportunity, and every rooftop whispers a secret.

Built upon the ruins of an ancient dwarven stronghold, Mazruth-Kul has expanded into a vibrant trade hub, attracting artisans, scholars, merchants, and criminals from across the realms. The city's walls rise like jagged teeth, built from ancient black stone, reinforced with iron by dwarven masons. The streets pulse with the scent of fresh bread from halfling bakeries, the acrid tang of tanneries, and the salty breeze drifting from the docks.

From the towering Highcourt District, where nobles weave their political games, to the shadowy depths of The Warrens, where thieves and beggars carve out a desperate living, Mazruth-Kul is a city of contrasts.

At the heart of the city, marble-clad towers and sprawling mansions rise above the common rabble in The Highcourt District. Here, noble houses and influential merchants make their homes, their lives filled with political intrigue and elaborate feasts. The streets are clean, well-guarded, and eerily quiet, with only the occasional whisper of scandal breaking the stillness.

The Temple Ward is dominated by soaring cathedrals and quiet monasteries, the Temple Ward is where priests, monks, and paladins tend to the city's spiritual needs. Bells ring at dawn and dusk, filling the air with an almost hypnotic rhythm, while incense and candlelight glow within vast stone halls.

A cacophony of voices rises in the Market Square, as merchants, farmers, and traders call out from wooden stalls, peddling everything from exotic spices to enchanted trinkets. Street performers juggle knives, a bard strums a tune, and pickpockets slip unseen through the crowd. The smells of roasted meat, fresh fruit, and unwashed travelers blend into a heady, chaotic aroma.

The heartbeat of Mazruth-Kul, where blacksmiths, armorers, carpenters, and ropemakers ply their trades is Tradesman's Row. Smoke rises from forges, the streets are covered in sawdust and metal shavings, and apprentices scramble to keep up with their masters. The air is thick with the scent of heated iron, cut wood, and fresh glue.

In the Docks wooden piers creak under the weight of ships from across the seas. Sailors unload cargo, smugglers whisper deals, and fishmongers shout their daily catches. The brine of the sea mixes with the sour scent of stale beer from dockside taverns, where rowdy brawls are as common as the tides.

The Warrens are a tangled maze of twisting alleys, crumbling tenements, and hidden passages, the Warrens house the city's poor and desperate. Lanterns flicker dimly, casting long shadows over ragged beggars, cunning thieves, and those who have fallen through the cracks of society. No guards patrol here—only the law of the strongest keeps order.

The Guild Quarter is the home of Mazruth-Kul's powerful trade guilds, where deals are struck over fine wine and master artisans set prices that shape the economy. Gold flows like water here, and apprentices dream of earning their place among the elite craftsmen.

The Foundry is a district of perpetual smoke and fire, where metal is smelted, weapons are forged, and industrial machines thunder endlessly. This is where Dwarven engineers and gnome inventors test their latest creations, often with *explosive* results.

The Catacombs are beneath the city, a labyrinth of crypts, sewers, and forgotten tunnels winds through the dark. Some say ancient horrors lurk in its depths, while others claim it is merely a thieves' highway for those wishing to move unseen.

As dawn breaks over Mazruth-Kul, the city awakens in a symphony of sound—the rhythmic beat of hammers, the chants of priests, the laughter of tavern-goers, and the whispers of conspirators. It is a city where dreams are made, fortunes are lost, and every corner holds a story.

And for those bold enough, Mazruth-Kul is a city of endless opportunity.

Hargin Ironheart sat on the broad stone steps of his newly inherited house in the Merchant's District of Mazruth-Kul, staring up at its aged oak door and sturdy stone frame. The house had belonged to his grandfather, Durgrim Ironheart, once healer. Though dust coated the windows and the hinges groaned with neglect, it was a fine home—strong, reliable, and built to last, much like a dwarf himself.

With only a handful of belongings, a small chest of coin left by his uncle, and a determination to make this place his own, Hargin moved in. The house was mostly empty, save for a few old chairs, a rickety table, and the heavy scent of time itself. It lacked the warmth of a home. That, he would remedy.

The next morning, Hargin hitched his wagon to his sturdy mountain horse, Branrock, a broad-chested, shaggy beast with a temperament as stubborn as his own. With a pipe clenched between his teeth and a mental list of furnishings he needed, he set off into the city streets, navigating the bustling market roads and the winding alleys of Tradesman's Row.

His first stop was Durim Stonefist's shop, "The Carved Hearth", where stone and wood met in masterful craftsmanship. There, he picked out a solid oak bedframe, a broad study table, and three bookcases, each carved with intricate dwarven runes of protection and wisdom.

Next, he visited Harker Timberjaw, the carpenter, who, despite being human, had a remarkable skill with wood. From him, Hargin bought a large cupboard, a dining table with six matching chairs, and a few extra stools.

For the small comforts of daily life, he made his way to Marin Goldleaf's shop, "Golden Trinkets", where he picked up a fine set of cutlery, brass candlesticks, and a well-crafted pipe stand.

By noon, his wagon was full, and he guided Branrock back through the streets, past bustling merchants, arguing traders, and children dashing between stalls, all the way home.

Back at the house, Hargin spent the next few hours hauling furniture inside, placing each piece with a careful and deliberate eye. The bed was set up in the back room, the dining table near the hearth, and the study room took shape with the bookcases lined against the wall, waiting to be filled.

Once satisfied, he lit his pipe, packed with fresh pipeweed from the market, and settled into a sturdy armchair near the fireplace. With a deep exhale of thick, fragrant smoke, he felt the weight of his journey lift.

The house no longer felt empty. It felt like his.

Among the few possessions left behind, Hargin had found an old leather-bound book, tucked away in a dusty wooden chest. Its cover bore his grandfather's name and an inscription in ancient dwarven script:

"To knowledge and to wisdom, may they guide strong hands and steady hearts."

The title read:

"The Green Vein: A Study of Rare and Potent Herbs"

Curious, he flipped it open, turning through pages of fine dwarven calligraphy. The text spoke of mystical and medicinal plants, many thought lost to time.

One passage caught his eye:

"There grows, in the high mountain crevices where the sun barely touches, the leaf of the Stonebloom. A hardy herb, stubborn as a dwarf's will, known for mending cracked bones and soothing weary spirits. When brewed into a tea, it carries the faint scent of iron and earth, fortifying the body against long winters and restless nights."

Hargin ran his fingers over the words, imagining the rough mountains of his homeland, where such herbs might still cling to the rocky slopes.

"To find the Stonebloom, one must listen to the wind's whisper and seek where no roots should dare."

He smiled. His grandfather always did enjoy riddles.

Leaning back in his chair, he let the fire crackle and the words settle in his mind. Perhaps this book was more than just an inheritance—it was a path to something greater.

As days passed, an idea took root—Hargin would open his own herbal and alchemist shop, offering both medicinal brews and healing services, just as his grandfather had. To prepare, he sought out books on herbs, alchemy, and ancient remedies, scouring the market and old bookstores. He returned home one evening with half a wagon load of aged tomes, their leather bindings worn but their knowledge invaluable. For months, he studied, learning the secrets of elixirs, poultices, and salves.

Finally, he knew he had to leave the comfort of his home. He packed his bag, secured his horse, and set off beyond the city walls.

The journey took him through rolling meadows, thick forests, and high mountain passes, where the air was crisp, the streams clear, and the land rich with wild herbs. Each day, he foraged from sunrise to dusk, carefully identifying and harvesting rare plants:

Stonebloom – A hardy mountain herb used for healing wounds. Ironleaf – A tough, grayish-green plant, crushed into a poultice for burns. Amber Thistle – A spiky flower that soothes fever when steeped in tea. Windroot – A fibrous root that grants clarity of mind when chewed. Mooncap Mushrooms – Luminous fungi growing in shaded glades, used in sleeping tonics. Dewfern – A delicate fern with tiny droplets on its fronds, known to ease anxiety. Bloodberry – Dark red berries that boost endurance but stain the fingers. Frostvine – A rare vine that retains cold even in warm climates, good for swelling. Ashroot – Found in volcanic soil, used in fire resistance potions. Glowmoss – A bioluminescent moss with antiseptic properties. Silverpetal – A flower used in calming draughts. Tangleweed – A creeping plant with coiling tendrils, used for joint pain. Dusksage – A purple herb that enhances night vision in potions. Firebloom – Bright red petals that can be ground into a stimulant powder. Wraithmint – A pungent herb that repels insects and soothes headaches. Blackthorn Berries – Small, bitter berries with potent healing properties. Hearthflower – A golden flower used in heart-strengthening tonics. Shadowfern – A rare plant growing in dark caves, known for enhancing stealth. Cloudmoss – A fluffy moss that absorbs toxins when brewed into tea.

By night, he camped by crackling fires, roasting fresh-caught fish from the streams, with the scent of earth and smoke surrounding him. He was at peace, knowing that soon, he would return to Mazruth-Kul, ready to begin his new life.

Hargin secured the bags of herbs tightly on his wagon, ensuring that none of his precious finds would spill during the journey back to Mazruth-Kul. With a satisfied nod, he urged Branrock forward, the wagon creaking under the weight of weeks of hard work. The road home was smooth, the familiar sights of the city's towering black stone walls and bustling gates welcoming him back.

As he rode through the streets, he planned his next steps. His grandfather's house would no longer just be a home—it would be a place of business, a proper herbalist's shop. When he arrived, he unloaded the herbs into the back storage room, then moved into the large front room of the house. With a discerning eye, he examined the space, picturing where shelves, counters, and display cabinets would fit. The adjacent room would serve as his study, where he would craft potions, study ancient texts, and refine his craft.

The next morning, Hargin set off again, heading straight to Harker Timberjaw's carpentry workshop in Tradesman's Row. The scent of freshly cut wood filled the air, and the rhythmic sounds of saws and hammers echoed throughout the shop.

"Ah, Master Ironheart! Back from the wilds, are ye?" Harker greeted, wiping sawdust from his hands. "Look like ye brought half the forest with ye."

Hargin chuckled, patting a pouch of dried herbs. "More like a piece of the mountains, lad. But I need woodwork now, not plants. I'm setting up shop—need sturdy shelves, a solid

counter, cabinets for storage, and a proper study table. Something that'll last as long as dwarven stone."

Harker nodded, rubbing his chin. "Aye, I've got just the thing. Oak and iron-braced pine, strong as they come. I can have it all ready for ye by midday."

Hargin agreed on the price, and by noon, he had his wagon loaded once more. The return home was slow, but setting up the shop was a task of pride. He arranged the shelves along the walls, setting the counter near the entrance, while the study room held the large central table surrounded by smaller side tables and cabinets to store his herbs and tools.

With the space taking shape, he realized he needed glassware for his work—vials, tubes, and flasks. That meant a visit to Kelwin Prismkin, the finest glassblower in the city.

Kelwin's workshop, "Prism's Craft", was a dazzling sight. Shelves of delicate glassware sparkled in the light of enchanted lanterns, their reflections dancing across the walls. The gnome himself was a sprightly figure, wearing a leather apron and peculiar goggles that made his eyes look comically large.

"Master Ironheart!" Kelwin chirped, rubbing his hands together. "I had a feeling you'd be by sooner or later. Word is you've got yourself a shop now, eh?"

"Aye, and I'll be needing the finest vials, tubes, and flasks ye've got," Hargin said, stepping carefully between stacks of delicate glass bottles. "Enough to stock a workshop, and then some."

Kelwin grinned. "Oh, I've got just the thing! Reinforced alchemist's vials, resistant to heat and cold. A set of mixing tubes, thin as an elf's patience. And—oh!—a few distillation coils, in case you plan to brew anything *real* interesting."

Hargin examined the goods, testing the weight and craftsmanship before making his selection. Gold changed hands, and soon his wagon was loaded again, the glass clinking gently as he returned home.

Once the shop and study were fully furnished, Hargin decided on one last step—finding an apprentice to assist in the work. He spent the evening writing posters, advertising the position for a keen-eyed learner with steady hands and a willingness to work with herbs and remedies.

The next morning, he pinned them up across the city, in the Market Square, the Guild Quarter, and near the docks, ensuring word would spread. As he stepped back, arms crossed, watching a few curious passersby read the notice

For weeks, Hargin immersed himself in study, poring over every book and manual he had gathered. Each morning, he lit a candle in his study, sat at his large wooden table, and read deep into the texts on healing, herbs, and alchemical practices. The scent of aged parchment and dried herbs filled the room as he meticulously noted down recipes, cross-referencing ancient techniques with newer findings.

As knowledge turned to practice, his workshop came alive with the scents of simmering brews and crushed plants. Using Kelvin Prismkin's vials and distillation equipment, Hargin set about brewing his first potions.

Each potion began with careful preparation of ingredients—some dried, some fresh, others ground into fine powders using a heavy stone mortar. The process demanded precision, as the balance of components determined the potion's strength and effectiveness.

Healing & Medicinal Potions he made included : Ironheart Tonic – A basic healing potion made from Stonebloom extract, dried Wraithmint, and honeyed root sap. It was boiled over low heat, strained, and stored in small amber vials. Firegut Elixir – A treatment for stomach ailments made from Bloodberry pulp, crushed Tangleweed, and a hint of Mooncap Mushroom to ease discomfort. Fermented for three days, then mixed with cooled herbal tea. Stormsleep Draught – A mild sleeping aid for those with restless nights, crafted from Dewfern leaves, Dusksage extract, and a drop of Silverpetal essence. When heated, it released a faint lavender-like scent. Cloudbloom Balm – A thick salve for wounds and bruises, containing Glowmoss paste, Frostvine oil, and finely ground Hearthflower petals. Frostlung Cure – A decoction for coughs and winter sicknesses, made from boiled Blackthorn berries, Windroot shavings, and a pinch of ground Ashroot.

Herbal Teas & Medicinal Packets he created are Dwarven Stonebrew – A robust tea made from Ironleaf and Tangleweed, meant to boost endurance and circulation. Whisperleaf Blend – A light floral tea using Silverpetal and Mooncap Mushroom, recommended for clarity of mind. Emberflower Infusion – A deep red tea of Firebloom petals and Amber Thistle, excellent for warming the body on cold nights. Elder's Rest – A calming tea for joint pain and muscle fatigue, using Cloudmoss, Dewfern, and a touch of Hearthflower. Nightveil Soother – A tea to aid with deep sleep, containing Dusksage, Wraithmint, and a drop of honey for taste.

Hargin spent long nights testing and perfecting his methods, ensuring that his brews were potent, safe, and effective. His shop shelves soon held rows of labeled vials, neatly packaged tea packets, and wooden boxes filled with dried herbs.

One crisp morning, as Hargin cleaned his counter and arranged fresh herbs, a knock came at the door. Wiping his hands on his apron, he stomped over and pulled the door open to find a small, cheerful-looking halfling girl standing before him.

She had curly chestnut hair, bright green eyes, and a slightly mischievous grin. Dressed in a simple linen tunic and wool trousers, she carried a small leather satchel slung across her shoulder.

“Good morning, sir! Name's Snobbit Quickroot. I saw yer poster for an apprentice, and I'm here to apply!” she said, her voice light and quick.

Hargin folded his arms, looking her over. “Hmph. And what do ye know about herbs, lass?”

Snobbit grinned wider, rocking on her heels. “Well, I know that Tangleweed helps with joint pain, Bloodberries stain like hell but are good for endurance, and if you chew on a bit of Wraithmint, it helps clear the sinuses!”

Hargin raised a bushy eyebrow, impressed. “Not bad. Where’d ye learn that?”

“My gran was a healer back in the Burrowdowns,” Snobbit replied, flicking a stray curl from her face. “Used to make me help her mix herbs. Said I had nimble hands and a good nose for ingredients.”

Hargin grunted approvingly. “Aye, nimble hands are good, so long as they’re not too quick with my coin purse.”

Snobbit laughed, holding up her hands. “Only thing I steal is knowledge, Master Ironheart. And maybe a second biscuit when no one’s looking.”

Hargin chuckled, despite himself. The girl had spirit, quick wits, and—more importantly—actual knowledge. He could teach her the finer points, but she had the foundations.

“Ten silvers a week, and ye’ll start by cleaning, sorting herbs, and preparing simple brews,” Hargin said. “Ye’ll also run errands and watch the shop when I’m busy.”

Snobbit beamed. “Deal!” She stuck out a hand, and Hargin clasped it firmly.

As she followed him inside, looking around in awe at the shelves of books and brewing equipment, Hargin knew he’d made a good choice.

His shop had come to life. Now, with an apprentice, it would truly begin to flourish.

A week after hiring Snobbit, Hargin found himself in a heated debate with none other than Ogran Bitterbrew, the grizzled half-orc apothecary who had been practicing his trade in Mazruth-Kul for decades. The two had never quite seen eye to eye—Ogran swore by thick, pungent brews that tasted like boiled leather, while Hargin believed that medicine should be effective but drinkable.

The dispute had started in Hargin’s shop, where a young merchant had come seeking a remedy for persistent stomach pains. Hargin was just about to hand the man a small vial of Firegut Elixir when Ogran stomped inside, his heavy boots thudding against the wooden floorboards.

“What in the nine hells do ye think yer doin’, Ironheart?” Ogran growled, his thick arms folded across his chest. “Givin’ this lad a sweetened brew? A proper tonic should burn the filth right out o’ him!”

Hargin’s bushy black brows furrowed as he placed his hands on his hips. “Aye? And send him retchin’ for half the day? There’s no need for sufferin’ when the herbs can do their work without twistin’ a man’s insides like a sailor’s knot.”

Ogran snorted. “Yer too soft. My Bitterroot Tonic clears a belly like a fire through dry hay.”

“Aye, because it near kills the drinker before it kills the sickness,” Hargin shot back.

The customer, looking increasingly nervous, muttered something about coming back later and slipped out the door while the two continued their verbal battle.

“This is why your kind never last in the trade,” Ogran muttered, shaking his head. “All frills and fancy packaging, like a noblewoman’s perfume.”

Hargin’s eyes narrowed dangerously. “And yer brews smell like an orc’s boot after a year in the swamps.”

Ogran growled, jabbing a thick finger toward Hargin. “Yer a pest, Ironheart, flappin’ about with yer dainty teas and sugared cures. If people want real healing, they come to me.”

Hargin crossed his arms, his deep voice booming. “Oh aye? That why ye lost half yer customers to me this month?”

Ogran’s face darkened, his tusked jaw clenching. “You watch yer tongue, dwarf.”

“I’d watch yours, but it’s probably black from all them rotted roots ye chew on.”

At that, Ogran let out a snarl of frustration and stormed out, knocking over a crate of vials as he did. Hargin, grumbling under his breath, bent down to pick up the mess, muttering, “Orc-hag.”

Two days later, the argument boiled over into a full-scale shouting match in the heart of the Market Square.

It started when an elderly woman, clutching a small jar of Hargin’s Cloudbloom Balm, wandered into Ogran’s stall, asking if he had anything “*less smelly*” than his usual cures. Ogran, hearing this, turned red as a boiled beet.

“That fluff-haired dwarf has ye believin’ his flowery nonsense?” Ogran bellowed, slamming his meaty fist on his stall. “Yer gettin’ fancy perfume, not medicine!”

Hargin, who had just arrived with a crate of fresh herbs, overheard. His nostrils flared as he marched forward.

“Oi, Bitterbrew! If ye can’t sell yer swill, don’t go blamin’ me fer makin’ somethin’ that folk can actually stomach!”

Ogran turned to face him, his massive arms flexing. “Yer weak, Ironheart. Ye coddle folk, makin’ ‘em soft with yer sugar-water brews!”

Hargin stomped a heavy boot on the cobblestones. “And ye’ve got the subtlety of a troll in a pottery shop, mixin’ dirt an’ vinegar an’ callin’ it medicine!”

By now, a crowd had gathered, stall keepers, shoppers, and street urchins watching with great interest.

A young bard in the crowd whispered to his companion, “Best entertainment I’ve seen all week.”

Ogran jabbed a calloused finger at Hargin. “Ye think yer better’n me, dwarf? Ye wouldn’t know real medicine if it bit ye on yer big-bearded arse!”

Hargin threw up his hands. “Aye, an’ I suppose ye think bitterness cures all wounds? Maybe we should bottle yer personality—it’d be the most wretched potion ever made!”

Snobbit, standing in the crowd, winced and muttered, “Oof. That’s gonna sting.”

Ogran’s face turned nearly purple. “Yer a gnat, Ironheart! A flappin’, yammerin’ pest!”

Hargin grinned wide, knowing he’d struck a nerve. “And yer a hag, Bitterbrew! A grumpy, moss-covered hag with all the charm o’ a swamp toad!”

The crowd burst into laughter, some clapping, others shouting bets on who would win the next round.

Ogran, realizing how much attention they had drawn, growled, yanked off his apron, and stomped away, shoving aside a market cart as he went.

Hargin, breathing heavily, dusted off his sleeves and turned back toward his own shop. As the laughter of the crowd faded, he smiled to himself.

That round went to him. But something told him the feud with Ogran was far from over.

A week after his public shouting match with Ogran Bitterbrew, Hargin found himself caught in another dispute—this time with Borgan Cleaversong, the city’s most well-known butcher. The issue? Poisoned meat.

It started when several citizens of the Market District fell ill after eating pork and beef cuts from Cleaversong’s shop. Stomach cramps, vomiting, fevers—word spread quickly, and soon, whispers filled the streets. Some blamed Borgan’s poor storage methods, while others—fueled by rival apothecaries—began to mutter that it was Hargin’s herbs that had caused the sickness.

By midday, Borgan himself stormed into Hargin’s shop, his thick arms crossed over his stained apron, his bushy brown beard bristling with fury.

“IRONHEART!” Borgan’s booming voice nearly shook the glass vials on Hargin’s shelves. “Ye sold me bad herbs, and now my customers are droppin’ like flies!”

Hargin, who had been carefully measuring ground Windroot powder, set down his tools and arched a thick eyebrow. “Bad herbs? Ye daft, Cleaversong? I’ve never sold ye a single leaf in my life!”

Borgan’s face turned red. “Don’t play dumb with me! I bought a batch o’ yer Cloudbloom Balm last week for preservin’ meats, and now folk are sick! Yer herbs are tainted, and I’ll not have my name dragged through the muck because o’ yer fancy plant business!”

Hargin planted his fists on the counter, his broad chest rising with controlled anger. “Aye, and who told ye it was my herbs what did it, eh? Or did ye just decide to throw the blame at me 'cause it’s easier than admittin’ ye left yer cuts sittin’ out too long?”

Borgan took a step closer, towering over the counter. “Ye best watch yer tongue, dwarf. I run the finest butcher shop in Mazruth-Kul. I know how to store me meats.”

Hargin snorted. “Aye? And that moldy sausage I saw hangin’ in yer window last week was just for decoration, then?”

Borgan slammed his fist on the counter, rattling glass vials and causing Snobbit—who had been carefully shelving bottles—to nearly drop one.

“By Moradin’s beard, ye’re both loud as a pair o’ ogres in a cookpot,” the halfling grumbled under her breath.

Borgan glared at her before turning back to Hargin. “Ye better fix this, Ironheart. If ye don’t prove them herbs o’ yers are safe, I’ll make sure the whole city hears about this.”

Hargin, jaw tightening, met Borgan’s angry gaze without flinching. “Oh aye? Then I suppose I’ll be provin’ it meself. But mark me words, Cleaversong—if I find out ye’re blamin’ me just to cover yer own mistake, I’ll make sure folk know the real truth.”

Borgan growled but said nothing more. With a final glare, he turned and stomped out, slamming the shop door behind him.

Hargin took a deep breath and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Blasted butcher’s got the patience of a goblin with a full bladder.”

Snobbit smiled. “Aye, but he’s given us a mystery, hasn’t he? I say we get to solving it before his shouting makes our customers run for the hills.”

Hargin grunted in agreement and grabbed his coat.

Hargin first checked his own stock. Every herb, every dried root and powdered leaf—all were accounted for, with no sign of contamination. No mold, no strange discoloration, nothing amiss.

Next, he and Snobbit paid a visit to Cleaversong’s butcher shop. The moment they stepped inside, the smell of blood, salt, and smoked meats filled their noses. Hanging cuts of pork and beef swayed slightly on their hooks, and the sawdust-covered floors were stained dark from years of butchering.

Borgan, arms crossed, grumbled. “Well? Let’s get this over with.”

Hargin ignored his attitude and got to work, checking the curing racks, the storage barrels, and the smoking chambers.

Then he found it.

A small burlap sack, tucked behind a barrel, half-covered in sawdust. Hargin picked it up, opened it, and his nostrils flared immediately.

“By the Stonefather...” he muttered, pulling out a dark, powdery residue.

Snobbit leaned in, sniffed, then coughed. “That’s not any o’ your herbs. Smells like Rotmoss Powder—the stuff used in rat poison.”

Borgan’s bushy brows shot up. “Rat poison? In my shop?”

Hargin dusted off his hands and glared at him. “Seems someone’s tampered with both our goods, Cleaversong. This ain’t mine, and it sure as hells ain’t accidental.”

Borgan, expression darkening, exhaled slowly. “So someone wants both our businesses ruined.”

Hargin nodded grimly. “Aye. And we best find out who.”

Borgan stood there, his thick arms crossed, his jaw tightening as the weight of realization settled over him. Someone had deliberately sabotaged them both.

Hargin tossed the burlap sack onto a nearby table, dusting his hands off. “Aye, seems like someone’s got it in their head to ruin both our reputations. Question is—who?”

Borgan grunted, rubbing his temples. “Plenty o’ folk’d like to see me outta business—competitors, jealous bastards, maybe even a few I’ve undercut in price. But this? This is low, even fer ‘em.”

Hargin nodded. “Same for me. There’s old-timers who don’t like a dwarf meddlin’ in herbalism, but none with the spine to pull this off.” He shot a glance at Snobbit, who had taken out a scrap of parchment and was already scribbling notes.

“Could be someone with a grudge against both of ye,” the halfling mused, tapping her chin with the feathered end of the quill. “Or someone who stands to profit if folk stop buying from ya.”

Borgan let out a low growl, shaking his head. “Bah. This is gonna take more than guesswork. We need proof. If someone’s tampered with my meat, they had to get in after hours.”

Hargin rubbed his beard thoughtfully. “Then we check yer storage. And yer deliveries. See if anythin’ don’t add up.”

Borgan nodded reluctantly. “Fine. But if we find out this is yer fault, Ironheart—gods help me, I’ll tan yer hide meself.”

Hargin snorted. “Aye, and if it’s yers, I’ll be expectin’ a lifetime o’ free bacon as an apology.”

Snobbit grinned. “I’ll take some sausages, too.”

Borgan shot her a side-eye, but muttered, “Hmph. Come on, then.”

They moved into Borgan’s backroom, where rows of salted meats hung from iron hooks, barrels of cured pork and beef lined the walls, and a stone smokehouse billowed faint traces

of lingering heat. The air was thick with the rich scent of preserved meats—and yet, something felt off.

Hargin knelt near a wooden crate filled with wrapped beef cuts. He ran a finger along the inside, then held it up to the light. A thin, grainy dust coated his skin.

“Here,” he grunted, showing it to Borgan.

The butcher frowned and bent down, sniffing it. His nose wrinkled immediately. “That ain't salt.”

Hargin sighed. “That’s where the poison was mixed in. Probably sprinkled it on the outer layers o’ the meat, hopin’ it’d get absorbed while it sat.”

Snobbit, standing on a stack of barrels, peered at the door. “Didn’t you say your lock was busted last week?”

Borgan grumbled, nodding. “Aye. Thought it was just age gettin’ to it, so I replaced it. Ye think someone forced their way in?”

Hargin narrowed his eyes. “If they broke in here, it means they’re bold—or desperate.”

Borgan scratched his chin. “Or both.”

Snobbit hopped down, dusting off her hands. “Who else had keys to the old lock?”

Borgan thought for a moment, then froze, his expression darkening. “Only two people. Me. And my old assistant, Davrin.”

Hargin looked up sharply. “Where’s Davrin now?”

Borgan’s mouth curled into a grimace. “That sniveling rat? Left me shop six months back—after I caught him skimming coins from me sales. I gave ‘im the boot.”

Hargin grinned, cracking his knuckles. “Sounds like we’ve got ourselves a suspect.”

Borgan cursed under his breath, his fists clenching at the mention of Davrin. “That little weasel always had sticky fingers, but I never thought he’d be bold enough to pull somethin’ like this.”

Hargin crossed his arms, his dark eyes narrowing. “Ye sure he’s still in town? A man who’s been caught thievin’ don’t usually stick around.”

Borgan grunted, shaking his head. “Oh, he’s still here, alright. Last I heard, he’s been runnin’ errands for some of the dockside traders—nothin’ official, just small jobs. Probably tryin’ to keep his head low.”

Snobbit, who had been listening intently, hopped onto a barrel and swung her legs. “So, we got a name, a motive, and a location. That’s more than enough to go knockin’ on doors.”

Hargin smiled. “Aye, and knockin’ is exactly what we’ll do—preferably with me fist.”

Borgan let out a low chuckle. “I’d pay good coin to see that.”

The Docks of Mazruth-Kul were always bustling—sailors unloading crates, merchants haggling over prices, and street urchins darting between carts, trying to snatch a free meal. It was a place of hard labor and shady deals, where gold changed hands as quickly as knives found backs.

Hargin, Borgan, and Snobbit wound through the maze of wooden piers and stone warehouses, asking questions along the way.

Borgan approached a fishmonger, a burly woman with calloused hands and a sharp tongue. “Oi, Marta. We’re lookin’ for a rat named Davrin. You seen ‘im?”

Marta wiped her hands on her apron and snorted. “Aye, saw ‘im two days ago. He was hangin’ round the Cask & Anchor, tryin’ to get work movin’ crates. Looked nervous, though.”

Hargin raised a brow. “Nervous how?”

She shrugged. “Kept lookin’ over his shoulder—like he was worried someone was watchin’ ‘im. I figured he owed the wrong folks coin.”

Snobbit grinned, adjusting her satchel. “Maybe he’s worried because he knows he did something stupid.”

Borgan cracked his knuckles. “Aye, well, he should be worried. Let’s pay the Cask & Anchor a visit.”

The Cask & Anchor was a low-roofed, dimly lit tavern, the kind where sailors drowned their coin in ale and traders made under-the-table deals. The air reeked of stale beer, salt, and sweat, and a thick haze of pipe smoke clung to the rafters.

Hargin spotted Davrin immediately—the thin, wiry man with a patchy beard, hunched over a mug at the corner of the bar. He was trying too hard to look inconspicuous, but the way his eyes flicked toward the door every few moments betrayed his nerves.

Borgan wasted no time. He stomped over and slammed a meaty hand on the table, causing Davrin to nearly jump out of his skin.

“Hells below!” Davrin sputtered, spilling his ale. His eyes widened as he recognized them. “W-what d’you want?”

Hargin leaned in, his voice low and dangerous. “We wanna know why you’ve been sneakin’ into Borgan’s shop and tamperin’ with his meat.”

Davrin’s face went pale as milk, his eyes darting around the room like a trapped rat. “I-I don’t know what you’re talkin’ about—”

Borgan grabbed the front of Davrin's shirt, hoisting him halfway out of his seat. "Don't play dumb with me, boy. Someone poisoned me meat, and we found yer old lock busted open. Ye think that's just coincidence?"

Davrin sputtered, struggling. "I—I didn't—! It wasn't my idea!"

Hargin's eyes narrowed. "Ah, so there *was* an idea, then."

Davrin realized his mistake too late, his mouth snapping shut.

Snobbit smiled, hopping onto a barstool. "Oh, go on, Davrin. Do tell. We're all *dying* to know."

Davrin sagged in Borgan's grip, knowing he was caught. His shoulders slumped, and his voice dropped to a near whisper.

"Look... I was paid to do it. A few weeks back, this fella in a dark cloak comes up to me outside the Cask & Anchor. Said he'd pay me twenty gold to sprinkle some powder over Borgan's meat stores. I—I needed the coin, alright? I didn't ask questions."

Hargin exchanged a sharp glance with Borgan. Twenty gold wasn't pocket change—it meant someone had a real reason to do this.

Borgan snarled, shaking Davrin slightly. "Who was he? Name?"

Davrin shook his head rapidly. "I don't know! He never said! Just left the coin in a pouch and told me where to find the stuff! Said if I talked, I'd regret it."

Hargin exhaled slowly, rubbing his beard. "This ain't just some petty rivalry. Someone wants both of us outta business."

Snobbit, legs swinging, tilted her head. "Which means the question is—who benefits from all this?"

Borgan released Davrin with a shove, causing the man to stumble back into his chair. "Yer lucky I don't tan yer hide. But if we find out yer holdin' back on us, I swear on Moradin's hammer—you'll regret it first."

Davrin nodded furiously, clearly terrified. "I swear, that's all I know!"

Hargin sighed. "Then I guess we best start askin' around. Someone's got a reason for all this schemin'—and I intend to find out why."

The next morning, Hargin, Borgan, and Snobbit gathered in Hargin's shop, going over everything they knew. The poisoned meat, Davrin's confession, and the mysterious cloaked figure all pointed to one thing—someone wanted them out of business.

Hargin leaned over the counter, his broad arms crossed. "Right. We know Davrin was just a pawn. Which means we need to figure out who paid him—and why."

Borgan grunted, rubbing his thick-knuckled hands together. “Aye. Whoever did this had coin to spare. Twenty gold’s no small sum for a petty grudge.”

Snobbit, sitting cross-legged on the counter, tapped her chin with a quill. “We got two main suspects. A rival herbalist who wants to ruin you, Hargin... or a butcher who wants Borgan’s customers.”

Hargin nodded. “Aye. Which means we need to start askin’ questions.”

Borgan cracked his knuckles. “I say we start with the butchers. I know the lot of ‘em, and if one’s schemin’ against me, I’ll smell it a mile away.”

Hargin smiled. “Then I’ll handle the herbalists. See if anyone’s got a reason to want me gone.”

Snobbit grinned. “And I’ll keep my ears to the ground. See what rumors are floatin’ around.”

With their plan set, they headed out into the city.

Borgan led the way toward the Butchers’ Guildhouse, a squat stone building near the Market Square, where the city’s licensed meat vendors handled business, prices, and disputes. The air smelled of smoke, salt, and fresh cuts, and workers bustled about, carrying sides of beef and crates of sausages.

As soon as Borgan stepped inside, a few heads turned. Some of the older butchers nodded in greeting, but one man—a thin, sharp-faced human named Veltren Greaves—visibly tensed.

Borgan noticed immediately.

“Well, well,” Borgan muttered under his breath. “Looks like we found someone nervous.”

Hargin, standing beside him, smiled. “Let’s have a chat, then.”

They approached Veltren’s stall, where the man was sharpening a cleaver. His thin lips twisted into a forced smile.

“Ah, Borgan. Didn’t expect to see you here so soon after the... ah, *incident*.” Veltren’s eyes flicked toward Hargin. “And you brought company.”

Borgan folded his arms. “Aye, I did. We’re lookin’ into what happened.”

Veltren chuckled dryly. “What happened? I’d say you should ask your own suppliers. Poor storage can do terrible things to a man’s business.”

Hargin’s eyes narrowed. “Aye, and so can sabotage.”

Veltren’s fingers tightened on his cleaver handle. “Now, now. Those are strong accusations.”

Borgan leaned forward, his voice low and dangerous. “Someone wants me outta business, Veltren. If it ain’t you, then maybe ye’d be willin’ to tell us who’s makin’ moves against me.”

Veltren hesitated. For a moment, Hargin thought he’d deny everything—but instead, the butcher sighed and set down his cleaver.

“There’s been talk,” Veltren admitted. “A few weeks ago, a man came round askin’ about you, Borgan. Wanted to know how much meat you sell, where you get your stock, how much folk trust your shop.”

Hargin’s brow furrowed. “Describe him.”

Veltren shook his head. “Didn’t see his face. Wore a dark cloak, kept to the shadows. But he had an accent—sounded like he wasn’t from Mazruth-Kul. Northern, maybe.”

Borgan exchanged a glance with Hargin. “That’s twice now we’ve heard of a cloaked outsider snoopin’ around.”

Hargin scratched his beard. “Means we’re lookin’ at someone with outside interests. Someone who’s got a stake in ruin’ local businesses.”

Borgan turned back to Veltren. “Ye hear anythin’ else?”

Veltren hesitated again, then nodded. “Aye. Word is, he’s been askin’ about more than just your shop. He’s been watchin’ the herbalists, too.”

Hargin’s stomach tightened. “Then we’d best move. If they’re targetin’ both of us, there’s more goin’ on than just a rival tryin’ to run us out of business.”

They thanked Veltren and left the guildhouse, marching toward the Herbalists’ Quarter—where another piece of the puzzle was waiting for them.

Hargin and Borgan marched through the winding streets of Mazruth-Kul toward the Herbalists’ Quarter, a quieter part of the city where the air was thick with the scent of dried herbs, floral perfumes, and pungent alchemical brews. The shops here were smaller than those in the Market Square, their signs carved with ivy patterns and arcane symbols.

Hargin had spent months building a reputation among these traders, and if someone was sniffing around, he needed to know who—and why.

Snobbit, who had caught up with them on the way, skipped ahead, darting through the crowd. “I’ll do some ear-to-the-ground work while you two do your grumpy dwarf routine,” she chirped before vanishing into the crowd.

Borgan grumbled. “Too smart for her own good, that one.”

Hargin smiled. “Aye, but damned useful.”

They approached Elderis Inkshade's shop, a modest but well-kept store known for its rare tinctures and scholarly approach to alchemy. Elderis, an elf of many winters, was known for his keen mind and sharper tongue.

A bell chimed as they entered, and the scent of parchment, dried lavender, and old ink filled the room. Elderis stood behind the counter, his silver hair tied back, flipping through a leather-bound tome. Without looking up, he said, "If you're here for something stronger than tea, Ironheart, you'll have to bribe me better this time."

Hargin snorted. "Ye charge a fortune for half-wit advice, Elderis. And I ain't got time for games."

Elderis finally looked up, his piercing blue eyes narrowing. "Oh dear. That means you're here for serious business."

Borgan crossed his arms, his expression stormy. "We're lookin' for a cloaked fella with a northern accent. Heard he's been askin' about us—meat shops and herbalists alike."

Elderis's brow lifted slightly. "Ah. That man."

Hargin's stomach tightened. "So you've seen 'im?"

Elderis closed his book and leaned on the counter. "He came in about two weeks ago. Asked plenty of questions, none of which I answered to his satisfaction." He gave a knowing smile. "I don't trust men who hide their faces, nor do I sell my knowledge to strangers with deep pockets."

Borgan grunted. "And what was he after?"

Elderis tapped his fingers against the counter. "Information on the trade routes for rare herbs—who supplies them, who controls the imports, which shops rely on local sources." He shrugged. "It was clear he wasn't planning to start his own garden."

Hargin frowned deeply. "He's not just trying to run us outta business. He's after control."

Elderis nodded. "If someone wanted to monopolize both fresh meat and medicinal herbs, putting key vendors out of business would be a fine first step."

Snobbit appeared suddenly beside them, holding a warm meat pastry in one hand. "Heard somethin' interesting," she said, chewing quickly. "Dockworkers say there's a new merchant in town—keeps to himself, but hires muscle to do his dirty work."

Hargin's jaw tightened. "That's our man."

Borgan cracked his knuckles. "Then let's pay him a visit."

The sun was setting over Mazruth-Kul's docks, casting long shadows across the warehouses and creaking piers. The salty breeze carried the distant shouts of sailors and the clatter of crates being loaded onto ships. The air was thick with tar, brine, and the ever-present stench of fish.

Hargin, Borgan, and Snobbit moved with purpose, their boots thudding against the damp wooden planks as they approached a warehouse on the eastern pier—the one the dockworkers had whispered about.

A large man with a scar across his nose stood near the entrance, leaning against a stack of barrels. He eyed them as they approached. “Ain’t no business here for you lot,” he said, voice gravelly and flat.

Hargin cracked his knuckles. “Aye? See, that’s where yer wrong. We’ve got plenty of business with the bastard inside.”

The man pushed off the barrels, standing tall. “Best turn around before things get—”

Borgan didn’t let him finish. His fist connected with the man’s jaw before he could even blink.

The crack of bone against bone echoed through the docks. The thug stumbled back, knocking over the barrels. Hargin didn’t waste time—he grabbed the man by his collar and drove a knee into his gut, dropping him like a sack of grain.

Snobbit hopped over the fallen thug, giving him a light tap on the head with her boot. “Told ya,” she muttered.

With the door now unguarded, Borgan shoved it open, and they stepped into the dimly lit warehouse.

Inside, crates of imported herbs, spices, and salted meats were stacked in neat rows. At a makeshift desk, surrounded by two more hired brutes, sat a man in a dark cloak—his hood pulled back to reveal a sharp-featured, pale-skinned human with piercing gray eyes.

The merchant.

He didn’t look surprised to see them. Instead, he leaned back in his chair, resting his hands on the desk. “I was wondering when you’d come knocking,” he said smoothly.

Hargin stepped forward, his fists tight. “Yer poisonin’ folk, sabotagin’ businesses, bribin’ thieves to ruin honest work. I don’t take kindly to that.”

The merchant smiled. “I prefer to call it eliminating competition.”

Borgan growled. “You’ll be eliminatin’ yer own teeth once I’m through with ya.”

The two hired thugs reached for their weapons.

Hargin was faster. He grabbed a small wooden crate and hurled it at the closest one, sending him staggering back with a grunt. Borgan charged the other, tackling him into a stack of barrels that burst apart on impact.

Snobbit, quick as a shadow, darted to the side, snatching a dagger from her belt and slashing across the first thug's thigh. He howled in pain, collapsing as blood spilled onto the wooden floor.

The merchant scrambled to his feet, knocking over his chair. He reached for a hidden dagger, but Hargin was already on him.

With a roar, the dwarf drove a fist into the man's stomach, knocking the air from his lungs. The merchant gasped, doubling over, and Hargin grabbed him by the collar, slamming him against a crate of stolen goods.

"You tried to ruin me. You tried to ruin Borgan." Hargin's deep voice rumbled with fury. "Who the hell are ye workin' for?"

The merchant spat blood, smiling despite the pain. "You think this ends with me?" he rasped. "You're playing in a much bigger game than you know, dwarf."

Hargin hauled him forward and slammed him back against the crate. "Names. Now."

The merchant let out a dark chuckle. "I'd be more worried about who's coming next."

Snobbit cursed under her breath, checking the bodies of the unconscious thugs. "Hargin, we need to get out of here. If he's right, more might be on their way."

Borgan grunted, wiping blood from his knuckles. "Aye. But we take him with us. He's gonna tell us everything he knows."

Hargin nodded. "Aye. Let's move."

They dragged the half-conscious merchant out of the warehouse, leaving the carnage behind. The streets of Mazruth-Kul weren't ready for what came next—but neither were they.

With the merchant bound and gagged, Hargin, Borgan, and Snobbit hurried through the darkened streets of Mazruth-Kul, avoiding prying eyes. The docks were too exposed for what came next. They needed someplace quieter, someplace with strong walls, strong ale, and stronger fists if things went south.

That meant Grum Redtusk's place—The Bloody Tankard.

The tavern was half-full when they entered, the usual mix of drunken sailors, off-duty city guards, and shady traders gathered around mismatched wooden tables, deep in their cups. The air was thick with the smell of ale, pipeweed, and sweat, the floors sticky from years of spilled drink and blood.

Grum, the massive half-orc tavern keeper, was polishing a dented tankard when he spotted them hauling in a beaten, bound man. His scarred lip curled into an amused sneer.

"Well, well," Grum rumbled, setting down the tankard. "Looks like someone's brought me a present."

Hargin grunted, dropping the merchant onto a chair. “Aye. But this one ain’t for drinkin’.”

Grum chuckled, crossing his thick arms. “I figured. What’d he do?”

“Poisoned meat, sabotage, bribery,” Borgan growled, cracking his knuckles. “Tried to run us outta business.”

Grum snorted. “Pity. Would’ve been easier if he’d just stabbed you. Fewer questions.”

Snobbit hopped onto a barstool, resting her elbows on the counter. “Oh, we got plenty of questions for him. Just gotta convince him to talk.”

Grum gestured toward the private back room, a small stone chamber with a single table, a few chairs, and a wall filled with old weapons and dented helmets—trophies from the many bar fights and brawls that had taken place over the years.

“Use the back,” Grum said. “Don’t break the furniture. Much.”

Hargin and Borgan dragged the merchant inside, securing him to a heavy chair. Snobbit shut the door behind them. The only light came from a single flickering lantern, casting long shadows against the stone walls.

The merchant, still half-conscious, groaned as he came to. His gray eyes fluttered open, taking in his new surroundings. A slow, grim smile curled across his bruised lips.

“Well,” he rasped, voice hoarse, “this is cozy.”

Borgan slammed a heavy fist on the table, rattling the lantern. “Talk. Now.”

The merchant exhaled sharply, then laughed. “You think beating me will get you what you want? I’ve been hit harder by a strong breeze.”

Hargin stepped forward, looming over the man, his broad dwarven form casting a heavy shadow. “Aye? Then let’s make it a storm, shall we?”

The merchant’s smile faltered.

Snobbit, sitting cross-legged on the table, pulled out a small dagger and began idly spinning it between her fingers. “Y’know,” she mused, “I’ve always wondered how much pain a man can take before he wishes he talked sooner.”

The merchant swallowed, his throat bobbing. “I—”

Hargin leaned in close, his breath hot with pipeweed and ale. “Name. Who hired you?”

The merchant hesitated—so Borgan punched him hard in the gut.

The chair creaked as the man doubled over, gasping for breath.

Hargin grabbed his hair, forcing him to look up. “Last chance. Give me a name, or I’ll let Borgan get creative.”

The merchant, panting, finally wheezed out a name:

“Varlo Cain.”

Hargin exchanged a glance with Borgan and Snobbit.

Snobbit tilted her head. “Never heard of ‘im.”

Borgan grunted, rubbing his chin. “I have. Merchant lord. Runs a fleet of trade ships. Deals in imports and exports—mostly legal, some... less so.”

Hargin’s eyes darkened. “So that’s who’s behind this.”

The merchant chuckled weakly. “You have no idea how deep this goes.”

Hargin grabbed his collar. “Then start explainin’.”

The merchant smiled. “You’ve made a powerful enemy, Ironheart.”

Hargin’s grip tightened. “Aye, and he’s just made one in me.”

Hargin tightened his iron grip on the merchant’s collar, his knuckles turning white. The name Varlo Cain echoed in his head, a name that carried weight and wealth, the kind that made problems disappear—or in this case, made honest businesses crumble.

Borgan let out a low, dangerous chuckle, cracking his thick knuckles. “Varlo Cain, eh? Figures a silver-lined bastard like him would be behind this.”

The merchant grimaced, still catching his breath. “You have no idea what you’re stepping into, Ironheart.” He coughed, spitting blood onto the stone floor. “Cain doesn’t just ruin businesses. He erases people.”

Snobbit, perched on the edge of the table, spun her dagger idly. “Huh. That so? Maybe he oughta learn that some folks don’t erase easy.”

Hargin grunted. “Aye, and he’s gonna learn it the hard way.”

The merchant chuckled, though it came out ragged. “You think you can stop him? He’s got coin, mercenaries, city officials in his pocket. You’re just a dwarf with a shop and a grudge.”

Hargin hauled him closer, his dark eyes burning with fury. “Aye? And yer just a lackey who tried to kill folk with poison. I’ve no use for yer tongue anymore.”

The merchant’s confidence faltered as he saw the cold fury in Hargin’s face. “W-wait—”

Hargin didn't wait. His thick fist drove into the man's jaw, snapping his head to the side. The chair tipped over with a loud thud, leaving the merchant groaning on the floor, half-conscious once more.

Grum Redtusk pushed open the door, raising a scarred brow at the sight of the beaten man on the ground. "Well," the half-orc rumbled, "he doesn't look too talkative now."

Hargin exhaled sharply, shaking out his bruised knuckles. "He's said enough."

Borgan rolled his shoulders. "Aye, and we got what we came for. We know who's behind this. Now it's just a matter o' how we handle it."

Snobbit hopped off the table, stretching. "We could try talkin' to Cain, but somethin' tells me a man like that don't do diplomacy."

Grum snorted. "Diplomacy ain't his way. Eliminating problems is."

Hargin nodded. "Then we need a plan. Cain won't stop 'til we're buried—so we strike first."

Borgan grinned fiercely. "Aye. Time we show him that some folk don't go down easy."

As the four of them stood in the dimly lit back room of the Bloody Tankard, the weight of what lay ahead settled over them. This wasn't just a business feud anymore—this was war.

Back at his shop, Hargin worked in grim silence, his hands moving with focused precision as he brewed something far stronger than healing potions.

The Firewater.

It was a volatile alchemical brew, made from fermented Emberflower, crushed Firebloom petals, and a distilled extract of Ignis Root—an herb so potent it was said to burn the throat of a dragon. Normally, it was used in small doses for medicinal warmth or battle stimulants, but when brewed right and bottled in glass vials, it became something else entirely.

Something explosive.

Borgan watched from the doorway, arms crossed. "Ye sure about this, Ironheart? This ain't just fightin' back—it's a declaration."

Hargin corked a vial, rolling it between his fingers. "Aye. Cain don't play fair, so neither will we."

Snobbit grinned from the counter, kicking her feet back and forth. "I like this plan. 'Sides, if Cain's got a problem with it, he can take it up with me."

Hargin turned to her, sliding three small vials across the counter. "That's what I was countin' on, lass. Yer quick, small, and smarter than any of us. That warehouse of his by the docks?"

Snobbit picked up the vials, shaking them lightly. The liquid inside shimmered like molten gold, thick and dangerous. “Aye, I know it. Big place, stacked with goods he smuggles in and out. Perfect for a little light show.”

Hargin nodded grimly. “Ye take these, go in the dead of night, and make sure no one’s inside but his guards. Then ye let it burn.”

Borgan let out a low chuckle, shaking his head. “I never thought I’d see the day ye turned into a proper criminal, Hargin.”

Hargin smiled, grabbing his hammer and slinging it over his back. “I ain’t turnin’ into one. I’m just showin’ Cain what happens when ye push a dwarf too far.”

Midnight. The streets of Mazruth-Kul were quieter now, save for the occasional patrol of city guards and the drunken songs spilling from taverns. Snobbit moved like a shadow, darting from alley to alley, her small frame hidden by darkness.

Cain’s warehouse loomed at the end of the docks, a massive wooden structure, its doors chained shut, the windows high and barred. Two hired thugs leaned against a crate near the entrance, muttering about their wages.

Snobbit smiled. “Easy pickings.”

She slipped around the back, where a loading hatch was left slightly ajar. Amateurs. Within seconds, she was inside, her footsteps silent as she moved past stacked crates of smuggled goods—silks, weapons, rare herbs, bottles of fine liquor stolen from noble estates.

She pulled a small flask of oil from her satchel and drenched the floor in streaks, leaving a trail leading back to the piled barrels of blackpowder she had spotted near the side. Then, she took Hargin’s Firewater, uncorked the vials, and poured them carefully along the wood beams.

With a wicked grin, she struck a flint spark to a rag, watching as the blue-gold flames erupted.

“And that’s my cue.”

She bolted for the loading hatch, slipping out just as the flames leapt upward, licking at the walls, catching the oil, spreading fast.

The first explosion came a moment later.

The windows shattered outward, sending shards of glass raining onto the docks. The thugs at the entrance barely had time to react before the roof timbers cracked, fire roaring through the wooden beams like a beast unleashed.

As the warehouse burned, the flames reflected off the dark waters of the harbor, turning the docks into a sea of orange light.

Snobbit watched from a nearby rooftop, grinning ear to ear.

“Hope Cain likes surprises,” she muttered, before vanishing into the night.

The next morning, Mazruth-Kul was alive with gossip. The mighty Cain’s warehouse, reduced to cinders, his smuggling operations crippled overnight. City guards swarmed the docks, questioning anyone who might have seen who did it.

Hargin sat in his shop, sipping his morning tea, when Borgan burst in, laughing like a madman.

“By the gods, Ironheart, I wish ye could see it! That bastard Cain’s got his entire empire scrambling!”

Hargin smiled, exhaling a puff of pipe smoke. “Good. Let ‘im squirm.”

Borgan’s laughter died down slightly, his grin fading. “Ye know this means he’s gonna come harder than ever. We just made it personal.”

Hargin set his tea down. “Aye. And next time? We finish it.”

Varlo Cain wouldn’t let this stand. Hargin knew it. The moment that warehouse went up in flames, the merchant lord’s pride was wounded, and men like Cain didn’t take insults lightly.

“We need to be ready,” Hargin rumbled, tapping his calloused fingers against the wooden table. “Cain’s got mercenaries, city officials, and more coin than the king’s own treasury. If we sit back, he’ll crush us.”

Borgan snorted. “Aye, but he ain’t the only one who can call in favors.”

Snobbit leaned forward, her green eyes glinting in the lantern light. “You got a plan, boys? Or are we just gonna keep torchin’ things ‘til we run outta buildings?”

Grum grunted from the doorway, arms crossed over his massive chest. “Burnin’ warehouses is fine fun, but Cain’s still got a grip on the city. If ye want to make a real move, ye gotta cut off his power.”

Hargin stroked his beard, thinking. “Aye... and to do that, we hit him where it hurts most.”

Borgan cracked his knuckles. “The bastard’s **holding a shipment at the South Docks tomorrow night. Rare goods, expensive stuff. If we take it, we bleed him dry.”

Snobbit smiled. “Or we could just blow it all up, like last time.”

Hargin shook his head. “Nay. We take it. We need leverage, not just fire.”

Grum grinned, showing sharp orcish teeth. “Then let’s take a ship.”

The night was thick with fog, the scent of salt and damp wood lingering over the harbor. The South Docks were quieter than usual, with only a handful of lanterns flickering in the darkness.

Varlo Cain's cargo was already being loaded onto a sleek black ship, guarded by a dozen armed men.

From their vantage point on the warehouse rooftop, Hargin, Borgan, Snobbit, and Grum watched in silence.

Snobbit pulled out a small brass spyglass, peering through it. "Huh. Fancy swords, crates of gold, silks, rare spices... Oh! And look at that—barrels of Black Powder."

Hargin's brow furrowed. "Black Powder? What in the hells is Cain plannin'?"

Grum grinned darkly. "A war, same as us."

Borgan rolled his shoulders, resting his heavy axe against his back. "Then let's give him one."

Hargin took a deep breath. "Right. We move fast, silent, and deadly."

Snobbit grinned, drawing two small daggers. "Silent? Aww, you never let me have any fun."

Hargin smiled. "Don't worry, lass. You'll get yer fun soon enough."

They moved like shadows, cutting through the thick mist, their boots soundless on the wooden planks.

Snobbit took the lead, slinking between crates, a dagger slipping between one unsuspecting guard's ribs before he could even gasp. She caught his body before it hit the ground, dragging him behind a stack of barrels.

Grum handled the heavy work, waiting until two guards walked past his hiding spot before grabbing one by the throat, slamming him into the other with bone-crunching force.

Borgan went in like a wrecking ball, charging straight at a group of three guards near the ramp leading onto the ship. He swung his axe in a brutal arc, catching one across the chest and sending him tumbling into the water. The other two barely had time to react before Borgan's boot met one's jaw, sending him sprawling, while his fist crushed the other's nose into his skull.

Hargin stepped aboard the ship, hammer in hand, his dark eyes scanning the deck. At the far end, overseeing the cargo being loaded, stood a tall man clad in dark leathers, a thin scar running down his left cheek. His piercing blue eyes locked onto Hargin immediately.

"You're a stubborn one, Ironheart," the man mused, drawing a slender rapier from his belt.

Hargin gritted his teeth, gripping his hammer tight. "And you're a dead man, Cain."

Varlo Cain smiled. "Come and try."

The battle erupted.

Cain moved like a viper, his rapier striking fast and precise, but Hargin blocked with his hammer, each blow sending sparks flying as steel met stone.

Snobbit flipped over a crate, sending a dagger flying toward one of the remaining guards, burying it in his throat.

Grum lifted one of the Black Powder barrels, hurling it overboard before it could be set alight by a stray spark. “No explosions this time!” he growled.

Borgan laughed as he cleaved through another guard, blood spraying across the deck. “Shame! Was lookin’ forward to a good boom!”

Cain twisted his blade, aiming for Hargin’s ribs, but the dwarf sidestepped, bringing his hammer upward in a crushing arc. The blow caught Cain’s wrist, sending his rapier clattering onto the deck.

Cain staggered back, holding his injured arm. “You’re making a mistake,” he hissed.

Hargin advanced, raising his hammer. “Aye. Yer mistake was startin’ this war.”

Cain lunged for a hidden dagger, but before he could reach it, Hargin’s hammer came crashing down onto his knee.

The snap of bone echoed across the deck. Cain screamed, collapsing onto one side, clutching his shattered leg.

Hargin knelt beside him, gripping Cain’s collar, bringing him face to face.

“This city don’t belong to you,” Hargin growled. “And it never will.”

Cain’s breath came in ragged gasps, his face twisted in pain. “You... you think this is over?”

Hargin smiled. “Aye, I do.”

With a final, brutal punch to Cain’s jaw, the merchant lord slumped unconscious, blood dripping from his split lip.

The battle was won. The city was theirs again.

Snobbit wiped her daggers on a nearby cloth, looking at Cain’s crumpled form. “So... what do we do with him?”

Hargin stood, stretching his sore shoulders. “We give him a one-way ticket outta Mazruth-Kul. And if he ever comes back...”

Home made

Hargin stood in the heart of the bustling Market Square, surveying the massive wooden barrels stacked high at a cooper's stall. The air smelled of sawdust, roasted meat, and the sharp tang of fresh cider. He stroked his thick black beard, inspecting the craftsmanship of the barrels, running his calloused fingers over the iron bands holding them together.

"These'll do," he muttered, tapping one of the barrels. "I'll take seven."

The cooper, a stout man with strong arms and a face like a weathered boot, grunted in approval. "Aye, these are solid oak, sealed tight. What're ye brewin', Ironheart?"

Hargin grinned. "Somethin' that'll put hair on a goblin's chest."

With the help of a few hired hands, he loaded the barrels onto his wagon and made his way back to his shop, the wagon creaking under the weight. As soon as he arrived, he hauled the barrels one by one down into the cellar—a cool, dark space with stone walls, perfect for brewing.

This was where he would craft his strongest drink yet—Raging Weasel.

Hargin started by filling the barrels with mountain spring water, hauled in from a well outside the city. Next came the base ingredients:

Apples, crushed into a thick, pulpy mash to add a hint of sweetness. Sulfur and powdered coal, a trick he'd learned from an old dwarven brewer—it added a powerful kick and helped the fermentation. Wild mountain herbs, gathered from the hills—Ironroot, Firebloom, and Frostmoss, each adding depth and bite to the final product.

The fermentation process was slow and deliberate. Hargin poured a blend of yeast and malt extract into the barrels and sealed them tight, letting the mixture bubble and transform into something potent.

To distill the alcohol further, he set up a series of copper coils and glass tubing over a roaring fire, collecting the strongest part of the brew—a fiery liquid that burned the throat but left a warmth in the belly.

After three weeks, the brew was ready.

Hargin took a deep sniff of the first barrel, the aroma of strong spirits hitting his nose like a punch. He scooped up a mugful, took a swig, and let out a coughing laugh.

"By Moradin's beard! That'll wake the dead!"

Satisfied, he began bottling it, labeling each one with his own seal—a carved image of a snarling weasel, mid-leap.

Soon, word spread about the legendary strength of Raging Weasel, and folk came from all over just to get a bottle.

One night, as Hargin sat in his study, grinding dried herbs into powder and stirring a bubbling potion over a small flame, he heard a faint scratching noise.

He looked up, brows furrowing.

From the corner of the room, a small rat scurried out of the shadows, its fur a mix of gray and brown, its beady black eyes curious rather than fearful.

The rat hesitated for a moment, then scampered forward, climbing up Hargin's boot.

"Eh?" Hargin rumbled, watching with amusement as the rat scurried up his leg, perching on his knee. It twitched its whiskers before boldly climbing onto his shoulder, sniffing at his beard.

Hargin let out a deep chuckle. "Well, aren't ye a cheeky little bugger?"

The rat nibbled his collar, seemingly unfazed by the gruffness of its new companion.

Hargin reached up and gently scratched the rat behind the ears, earning a contented squeak in return.

"Guess I oughta call ye somethin'," he mused. After a pause, he smiled. "Squeek."

From that night forward, the rat became a regular visitor. Each evening, as Hargin worked in his shop, Squeek would appear, running across the shelves, inspecting the herbs, and sometimes curling up in Hargin's coat pocket as he read from old tomes.

Over time, Squeek became his companion, darting around the shop during the day, snatching crumbs from unsuspecting customers, and even chasing off the occasional cockroach.

With his potions, teas, and now Raging Weasel selling fast, Hargin found himself with more gold than he'd ever had. His shop was flourishing, customers lining up each morning for his wares.

But despite his growing success, Hargin never lost his love for the wild places.

Every few weeks, he packed his satchel, grabbed his foraging knife, and set out for the mountains and forests beyond Mazruth-Kul, Squeek riding on his shoulder.

There, he found fresh herbs, rare berries, and thick barks soaked in mountain rain, all of which he brought back to his shop to craft new remedies and concoctions.

Life was good, and for the first time in a long while, Hargin felt truly at peace.

The morning bells of Mazruth-Kul had barely finished ringing when a well-dressed messenger arrived at Hargin's shop, panting from the effort of rushing through the crowded streets. The young lad, barely old enough to hold a sword, straightened his tunic and cleared his throat.

"Master Ironheart?"

Hargin, who had just finished corking a fresh batch of Raging Weasel, turned to face the boy, arms crossed over his barrel chest. "Aye, what is it?"

“The noble house of Lord Tiberian Greythorne requests your immediate presence,” the boy declared. “His lordship’s son is gravely ill, and the healers of the city are divided on the best treatment.”

Hargin grunted, wiping his hands on his apron. “Ain’t that what clerics are for?”

The messenger hesitated. “The priests of Aedran’s Temple have been unable to cure him. They say it is a matter of alchemy and herbalism.”

That caught Hargin’s attention. “Aye? And who else is offerin’ their so-called cure?”

The boy shifted uncomfortably, then answered, “Amma Greenbloom.”

Hargin’s eye twitched.

By the time Hargin arrived at Greythorne Manor, Amma was already there, standing tall in the courtyard, her arms crossed, her gaze as sharp as a hawk’s.

Amma Greenbloom had been Mazruth-Kul’s most respected herbalist for years before Hargin had arrived on the scene. Her methods were traditional, gentle, and refined, while Hargin’s were blunt, strong, and effective.

They had butted heads before, but never like this.

“Well, well,” Amma said, her thin lips curling into a smile as Hargin stomped toward her. “I suppose the rumors were true. You’re peddling moonshine and brute-force medicine now?”

Hargin snorted, adjusting his belt. “Aye, and ye’re still sellin’ overpriced grass water to the nobility?”

Before Amma could fire back, the steward of House Greythorne stepped forward, raising a hand. “Enough. The young master Edwin grows weaker by the hour. The Greythorne family seeks the best remedy possible, but you both claim to have the cure. As such, Lord Tiberian has proposed a trial.”

Hargin narrowed his eyes. “What kinda trial?”

The steward clasped his hands. “Each of you will administer your remedy. The temple cleric, Brother Alric, will oversee the results. Whichever cure works best... shall be deemed superior.”

Amma smiled. “Fair enough.”

Hargin grinned. “Aye, lass. Let’s see who knows their herbs better.”

Hargin was led into a grand chamber, where young Edwin Greythorne lay in a large feathered bed, pale and barely conscious. The boy’s skin was clammy, his breathing shallow, and his veins darkened—clear signs of a poisoned blood.

Amma, standing across the room, already had a pestle in hand, carefully crushing fresh herbs into a fine paste.

Hargin muttered under his breath. “Of course she’s doin’ it the slow way.”

He moved to the study table, pulling out his own supplies. His approach would be different—stronger, more direct.

Amma’s Cure: Silverpetal Leaves: To purify the blood. Mooncap Mushrooms: To strengthen the body’s resistance. Ground Dewfern Root: A gentle stimulant to bring warmth to the body.

She mixed the herbs into a warm tea, stirring in a precise pattern, before carefully ladling it into a silver cup.

Hargin’s Cure: Ironleaf Extract: To flush the poison out. Bloodberry Essence: To reinforce the heart. A single drop of Firebloom Tonic: To burn away any lingering illness.

He didn’t bother with tea. Instead, he mixed his tincture in a small glass vial, giving it a deep shake before stepping forward.

Brother Alric, the temple cleric, took both remedies and turned to the family. “Which shall be given first?”

Lord Greythorne, standing solemnly near the bed, hesitated, then nodded toward Amma.

“We will try Madam Greenbloom’s cure first.”

Amma smiled at Hargin as she stepped forward. “Watch and learn, dwarf.”

Amma’s tea was gently spoon-fed to young Edwin. The noble boy’s lips twitched, and he shuddered slightly. A few moments passed.

The dark veins faded slightly.

The steward exhaled in relief, nodding. “It works.”

Amma tilted her head at Hargin. “Looks like I win.”

Hargin rolled his eyes. “Aye? Then why’s the boy still wheezin’ like an old goat?”

Lord Greythorne’s brow furrowed. “You claim yours will do better?”

Hargin stepped forward, holding his small glass vial. “One sip. That’s all it’ll take.”

Brother Alric hesitated. “It looks... potent.”

Hargin grinned. “Aye. Because it works.”

The noble hesitated, then nodded. “Do it.”

The cleric carefully tilted Edwin's head back, letting two drops of Hargin's remedy trickle past his lips.

The reaction was immediate.

The boy's body tensed, his face flushing red as the tonic coursed through his veins. Then, in a single deep gasp, he inhaled sharply—his first full breath in days.

The dark veins vanished entirely.

Edwin blinked, his glassy eyes clearing, and croaked, "I... I feel better."

The room erupted in shocked murmurs.

Brother Alric touched Edwin's forehead. "The fever is gone."

Lord Greythorne, looking upon his fully awake son, turned to Hargin.

"You've won," he said solemnly.

Amma's face fell, her hands tightening into fists. She turned to Hargin, her jaw tight. "I won't forget this."

Hargin smiled, crossing his arms. "Aye? Then I'll be waitin' for yer next try, lass."

Hargin left Greythorne Manor with a heavy pouch of gold and a smug grin. His reputation? Stronger than ever.

As he walked back to his shop, Snobbit fell into step beside him. "So... what's next?"

Hargin chuckled, exhaling a puff of pipe smoke. "Next? I make another batch o' Raging Weasel and see who challenges me next time."

The trouble began, as most trouble does, with Snobbit.

It was a quiet evening in Hargin's shop. The shelves were well-stocked, the cauldron in the corner bubbled with fresh tonic, and Hargin was deep into an ancient herbal compendium, puffing on his pipeweed while Squeek scurried across the counter, sniffing at dried bundles of Silverpetal.

Snobbit, ever restless and full of bad ideas, watched Squeek with interest, her dagger spinning idly between her fingers.

"Ye know," she mused, "I bet I could teach 'im to fetch herbs."

Hargin raised a bushy brow, exhaling a puff of smoke. "Lass, he's a rat, not a shop apprentice."

Snobbit grinned. "Aye, but he's a clever rat. Look at 'im! What if I trained him to bring me small packets of leaves? Wouldn't have to climb the shelves meself then."

Hargin grumbled, flipping a page in his book. “I’d rather he not go chewin’ holes in me stock.”

Snobbit ignored him, instead holding out a small dried berry. “Here, Squeek. Bring me that jar of Dusksage over there, and this is yers.”

The rat perked up, sniffing the air, then scurried toward the shelf, his tiny paws gripping a glass jar half his size.

Hargin grunted in mild surprise. “Hmph. He actually did it.”

“See?” Snobbit beamed, tossing the berry toward Squeek, who happily snatched it up and scurried back to his usual perch.

Pleased with herself, Snobbit reached for a small vial she had been tinkering with earlier—a bright green experimental growth tonic that she’d been meaning to test on some dying plants.

“Alright, Squeek, let’s make this a bit more interesting.”

Before Hargin could stop her, she flicked a few drops of the tonic toward Squeek.

The rat squeaked in annoyance, twitching his whiskers as the liquid soaked into his fur.

Hargin slammed his book shut. “Lass... what did ye just do?”

Snobbit waved a hand. “Relax, relax. It’s just a mild—”

Then the floor trembled.

Squeek let out a high-pitched squeal, his body shivering as his fur bristled.

Then he began to grow.

His tiny paws stretched, his tail thickened, and his beady black eyes widened in confusion as his body ballooned to the size of a large dog—then bigger.

Hargin and Snobbit stumbled back as their beloved pet rat swelled to the size of a small pony, his long tail knocking over a stack of books and his nose sniffing the air at a height he’d never reached before.

The room went silent.

Squeek twitched his whiskers, then hopped onto the counter with an ominous THUD.

And then, as if realizing the sheer majesty of his new form, he puffed out his chest, sat up on his haunches, and chattered loudly—as if issuing a decree.

Snobbit slowly turned to Hargin.

“...I think I broke ‘im.”

By morning, Squeek had declared himself ruler of Hargin's herbal shop.

He perched proudly on the counter, his massive tail coiled around the weighing scale, refusing to let any customers enter unless they brought offerings of cheese.

A terrified halfling had arrived earlier, hoping to buy a remedy for a headache—only to be chased out by a rat the size of a warhound.

Hargin, standing in the doorway, pinched the bridge of his nose, inhaling deeply. "This is a new low. Even for us."

Snobbit, frantically flipping through a book of antidotes, winced. "Aye, I mighta miscalculated."

Borgan, who had arrived purely to witness the chaos, was howling with laughter from the corner. "By the gods, Ironheart, ye've got a bloody rat king in yer shop!"

Grum Redtusk, the tavern keeper, had even wandered by, taking one look at the pony-sized rat, shaking his head, and muttering, "I need a drink."

Meanwhile, Squeek stared at Hargin expectantly, his whiskers twitching.

Hargin folded his arms, glaring at the rat. "I ain't givin' ye more cheese."

Squeek stamped his massive foot on the counter and let out a loud squeak of indignation.

Hargin sighed. "Snobbit. Fix this. Now."

After an hour of panicked research, Snobbit finally declared, "I think I got it!"

Hargin raised a bushy brow. "Ye think?"

Snobbit hurriedly mixed the ingredients together: Tangleweed Extract – Known to counteract unnatural growths. Mooncap Mushroom Dust – To stabilize the effects. Dewfern Root Paste – To prevent unwanted side effects.

She held up the vial of purplish liquid, nodding. "This should shrink him back down to rat size."

Hargin took the vial, squinted at it, then turned to the monstrous rat, who was now trying to open a jar of dried meat with his oversized paws.

"Alright, lad," Hargin muttered. "Time to step down from the throne."

Squeek chirped in protest, narrowing his beady eyes.

Hargin, without hesitation, uncorked the vial and dumped it over Squeek's head.

There was a pause.

Then—a bright green glow surrounded the massive rat, his fur bristling as the magic took effect.

With a soft pop, Squeek shrank down to the size of a rat, letting out a very undignified squeak of alarm as he flopped onto his back.

For a long moment, no one spoke.

Then Snobbit grinned. “Well. That was educational.”

Hargin grumbled, scooping up his now-normal-sized rat and placing him back on his shoulder. “Aye. And yer banned from experimentin’ on Squeek.”

Snobbit pouted. “But he was a great shop guardian!”

Hargin shot her a look. “Lass. He was demandin’ cheese tributes.”

Snobbit crossed her arms. “And?”

Borgan wiped a tear from his eye, still chuckling. “Ach, this was the best thing I’ve seen all year.”

Hargin sighed, scratching Squeek behind the ears as the tiny rat curled up on his shoulder once more. “I swear to the gods... one o’ these days, this shop’s gonna be the death o’ me.”

Snobbit grinned. “Aye. But what a way to go.”

Hargin sat at the heavy wooden table in his study, the warm glow of lantern light flickering off the glass vials and mortar bowls scattered across its surface. Across from him, Snobbit perched on a stool, her sharp halfling eyes darting over the various herbs, powders, and bottles before her.

“Right then, lass,” Hargin said, rolling up his sleeves. “Alchemy ain’t just throwin’ things in a pot and hopin’ it don’t explode. It’s about balance, precision, and knowin’ yer materials.”

Snobbit smiled. “So, no explodin’, got it. That’ll be a challenge.”

Hargin sighed but chuckled. “Aye, let’s keep the shop intact, at least fer today.”

He reached for a dried sprig of Emberleaf, holding it between his fingers. “This here is Emberleaf. Good fer pain relief, but too much’ll set yer throat burnin’.” He crushed a small amount into the stone mortar and handed the pestle to Snobbit. “Grind it down. Even, like.”

Snobbit took the pestle and began grinding with enthusiasm, but Hargin quickly grabbed her wrist. “Steady, lass. Yer not breakin’ rocks—yer coaxin’ the essence out.”

She adjusted her grip, grinding in a slow, circular motion. Soon, the Emberleaf was a fine, fragrant powder.

“Good,” Hargin said, nodding. “Now, we mix it with Dewfern Root Extract. That’ll ease the heat of the Emberleaf while enhancin’ the healin’ properties.” He took a small glass pipette, carefully dripping a few golden drops into the mix.

Snobbit leaned in. “Smells... kinda sweet. Like honey.”

“Aye, that’s why folks like it in tonics,” Hargin said, stirring the mixture. “But we ain’t done yet. Ye ever heard of Gloamberry Essence?”

Snobbit shook her head. Hargin grabbed a small black vial and uncorked it, letting her take a whiff. She recoiled instantly, wrinkling her nose.

“Ugh! Smells like somethin’ crawled in a boot and died!”

Hargin laughed. “Aye, but just a drop o’ this’ll triple the effectiveness of the mix.” He used a thin glass rod to stir in the dark liquid, watching as the mixture took on a deep crimson hue.

Snobbit watched closely, fascination replacing her usual mischief. “It’s changin’ color.”

“That’s alchemy fer ye, lass,” Hargin said. “Now we strain it, bottle it, and let it sit. Tomorrow, we test it.”

Snobbit raised a brow. “On who?”

Hargin smiled. “Volunteers. And if we can’t find any... well, ye best hope it works.”

Snobbit laughed, shaking her head. “Remind me again why I signed up for this?”

Hargin clapped a strong hand on her shoulder. “Because ye love trouble, and alchemy’s just trouble in a bottle.”

Hargin stood at his study table, a thick old tome spread open before him, its pages filled with arcane symbols and ancient writings. Snobbit sat across from him, her chin propped in her hands, listening as he turned a page, tracing a finger along a faded passage.

"Alchemy ain't just brewin' potions, lass," he began, his voice low and firm. "It's about understandin' the nature o' things—breakin' 'em down, purifyin' 'em, and forgin' somethin' greater."

Snobbit raised a brow. “Aye, I got that much. But where does all this mystical mumbo-jumbo come in?”

Hargin grunted, tapping the open book. “From here, and from centuries o’ study. Alchemy ain’t just about makin’ gold or curin’ ills—it’s about transformation. Of matter, aye, but also o’ the self.”

He pointed to a sketched diagram of a flame within a triangle. “This here’s Sulfur. One o’ the three prime substances in alchemy.”

Snobbit leaned in, intrigued. “Sulfur... the stuff that stinks like rotten eggs?”

Hargin chuckled. "Aye, but in alchemy, Sulfur ain't just an element—it's a principle. It represents fire, change, energy. Passion. The thing that makes somethin' truly alive." He tapped another symbol—a teardrop-like shape. "And this? Mercury. It's the opposite—fluid, balancin' things, keepin' the whole mix from burnin' up in its own energy."

Snobbit nodded slowly, frowning. "So... if Sulfur's the fire, and Mercury's the, what, cooling bit? What happens when ye put 'em together?"

Hargin grinned, flipping the page to reveal a golden sun. "Ye get the third piece: Salt. Stability. It holds everything together. Ye need all three to turn base materials into somethin' better."

Snobbit squinted at the book. "And this helps how?"

Hargin reached for a small iron knife on the table. He held it up. "Look at this blade, lass. It's just iron. If I heat it, quench it, work it properly... it gets stronger, sharper, better. That's what alchemy is, but with more than just steel. It's a way o' lookin' at the world. A way o' changin' it."

Snobbit tapped her fingers on the wood, thoughtful. "So when ye make a potion, ye're doin' the same thing?"

Hargin nodded. "Aye. Every potion, every tincture, every cure—it's all about findin' the right balance o' forces. Push too far one way, and ye ruin it. Don't push far enough, and ye waste yer time."

Snobbit grinned, eyes glinting with interest. "I think I'm startin' to get it. So... what's this Great Work folk always go on about?"

Hargin's expression grew serious. He turned the book to a drawing of a coiling serpent eating its own tail—the Ouroboros.

"The Great Work," he murmured, tracing the image with his thumb, "ain't just one thing. It's a journey. A way to understand the world. A way to turn ignorance into wisdom, chaos into order."

Snobbit studied the page, her grin softening into something thoughtful. "And what happens when ye finish it?"

Hargin leaned back, exhaling a puff of pipe smoke. "Ye don't."

The room fell silent, the weight of his words settling over them like the scent of old parchment and burning herbs.

Mines

Hargin and Snobbit moved swiftly through the narrow alleys of Mazruth-Kul, their bags slung over their shoulders, their boots barely making a sound on the worn cobblestones. The old abandoned mines lay beyond the city walls, hidden within the jagged cliffs where Mazruth-Kul had once flourished as a mining town.

“I still don’t get why we gotta sneak in,” Snobbit whispered, adjusting the dagger at her belt.

Hargin grunted. “’Cause if the city guard catches us, they’ll be askin’ why two respectable businessfolk are sneakin’ into a condemned mine with chisels and pickaxes.”

Snobbit smiled. “Respectable, eh? Ye must be talkin’ about yerself, cause I’ve never claimed such a thing.”

Hargin chuckled, shaking his head as they ducked behind a crumbling wall and slipped into the mine entrance.

The air grew cold immediately, thick with the scent of damp earth, rusted metal, and stale air. Their lantern flickered as they moved deeper, past rotting wooden support beams and rusted old mine carts, the echo of their footsteps bouncing off the stone walls.

“Y’know,” Snobbit mused, running a hand along the tunnel wall, “ye’d think folk would still be mining here, seein’ as we’re about to dig up somethin’ useful.”

Hargin examined the walls, running a calloused hand over the stone. “Place dried up years ago. But there’s always somethin’ left behind.” He pointed to a vein of dark stone running along the wall. “See that? Mercury ore. Cinnabar.”

Snobbit raised a brow. “So we just dig it out, aye?”

Hargin nodded. “Aye. But be careful—breathe in too much dust from this stuff, and ye’ll be coughin’ blood by mornin’.”

They set to work, taking turns with an old pickaxe, chiseling away at the stone, carefully knocking loose chunks of cinnabar and packing them into cloth-lined pouches. Hours passed, the sounds of their tools echoing through the tunnels.

“Found any sulfur yet?” Snobbit asked, wiping sweat from her brow.

Hargin sniffed the air. “Aye. Smell that?”

Snobbit wrinkled her nose. “Smells like an ogre’s armpit.”

Hargin grinned, pointing at a cluster of yellowish rock near the tunnel floor. “That’s sulfur.”

Together, they pried chunks loose, storing small but valuable pieces into their bags. The hours dragged on, their bodies aching from the effort, but by nightfall, they had not enough.

A faint clicking sound, echoing through the tunnel behind them.

Snobbit froze, her hand immediately reaching for her dagger. “Please tell me that’s not what I think it is.”

Hargin, gripping the pickaxe, slowly turned toward the darkness. “Lass... don’t move.”

A massive spider crawled from the shadows, its eight legs tapping against the stone, its many eyes reflecting the lantern light like droplets of oil. It was the size of a large dog, its thick black body covered in wiry hairs, its fangs dripping venom as it let out a chittering hiss.

“Well, shite,” Snobbit muttered. “I hate spiders.”

The creature lunged.

Hargin barely had time to react before it leapt toward them, its fangs snapping at his face. He swung the pickaxe with all his strength, catching the beast in the side. The sharp iron head bit deep, but the spider shrieked and thrashed, throwing him back against the tunnel wall.

“Snobbit!” he barked.

“I see it!” Snobbit rolled under the spider’s belly, slashing upward with her dagger, cutting into the soft flesh between its legs. Black ichor sprayed from the wound, but the spider shrieked in rage, spinning wildly to attack her.

Hargin gritted his teeth, pushing himself to his feet. “Over here, ye eight-legged bastard!”

The spider turned toward him, rearing up on its back legs, fangs dripping. It lunged again, but this time, Hargin was ready. He swung the pickaxe straight into its face, the iron spike piercing through one of its eyes.

The spider let out a piercing screech, its legs flailing wildly.

Snobbit climbed onto its back, driving her dagger deep into its neck, twisting the blade with a sharp jerk.

With one final spasm, the spider collapsed, its body twitching before it finally went still.

For a moment, neither of them spoke, their heavy breaths the only sound in the tunnel.

Then Snobbit hopped off the corpse, shaking black ichor off her boots. “That was disgustin’.”

Hargin leaned on his pickaxe, catching his breath. “Aye... but we’re still alive.”

Snobbit smiled, wiping her dagger on her sleeve. “Not bad fightin’, old man.”

Hargin let out a gruff laugh. "Not bad yerself, halfling."

The tunnel stretched onward, twisting through the earth like an ancient serpent, the air growing thicker and hotter as Hargin and Snobbit pressed forward. They still needed more sulfur, and the deeper they went, the stronger the pungent stench of it became.

Snobbit reached up and snatched a half-burnt torch from an iron sconce on the wall. She struck her flint and steel, and after a few sparks, the torch roared to life, illuminating the crumbling rock and wooden beams that lined the tunnel.

"Remind me again why we're still down 'ere?" she muttered, stepping over a broken minecart track.

Hargin adjusted the heavy cloth sack slung over his shoulder. "Because ye spilled half the last batch on yer boots, and we need more."

Snobbit rolled her eyes. "One accident. And yet here we are, crawlin' through a mine instead of sleepin' in a warm bed."

"Less complainin', more climbin'," Hargin grunted, hoisting himself up a ledge.

Snobbit followed, scrambling up the rough stone, then jumping down with a light-footed landing. Hargin, being less nimble, dropped down with a heavy thud, causing dust to billow up around them.

For the next half-hour, they crawled through narrow passages, leapt across gaps in the old mine floor, and knocked loose small chunks of sulfur-rich rock, stuffing them into their bags.

When they finally found a flat stretch of tunnel, Hargin let out a heavy sigh, dropping his bag and settling onto a cool stone slab.

"Aye, we sit fer a bit." He pulled out a loaf of dark bread, tearing it in half and handing a piece to Snobbit.

The halfling plopped down next to him, taking the bread eagerly. "About time."

Hargin uncorked his waterskin—though it held no water, only ale—and took a long swig, sighing contentedly.

"Ye live like a king," Snobbit said, watching him.

"Aye," Hargin smiled, wiping his mouth, "but I fight like a dwarf."

Snobbit snorted, munching on her bread, the two of them resting in comfortable silence as the flickering torch cast long shadows on the rock walls.

Then, without warning—

A harsh, guttural screech rang out from behind them.

Before either could react, small clawed hands grabbed them from the darkness.

Hargin roared in anger, reaching for his hammer—only for a rusty blade to smash across his head, sending stars flashing before his eyes.

Snobbit cursed, twisting in the goblins' grip, but there were too many—five, maybe six—and one of them clubbed her over the back of the head.

Everything went black.

Snobbit's head throbbed like a drum, her vision swimming as she blinked herself awake. The first thing she noticed was the awful smell—a rancid mixture of rotting meat, unwashed bodies, and something far worse.

She tried to move, but thick ropes dug into her wrists.

Tied.

She let out a groan and turned her head. Beside her, Hargin was still out cold, his chin resting against his chest, thick ropes binding him to the same wooden post.

"Oi," she hissed, nudging his leg with her boot. "Wake up, ye hairy bastard."

Hargin let out a deep snore, then blinked groggily. "Wha' in the—"

Then he smelled it.

"By Moradin's hairy arse!" he bellowed, jerking against the ropes. "What in all the hells is—"

"Shh!" Snobbit whispered fiercely, tilting her head toward the hulking shape across the room.

The ogre.

The massive brute sat at the far end of the goblin den, hunched over a pile of half-rotten bones, cracking them open with his teeth and sucking the marrow from them. He let out a loud, wet belch, followed immediately by a deafening fart that echoed through the cavern. Besides him was a small chest filled with gold and silver nuggets.

Snobbit gagged. "Oh, gods, kill me now."

The ogre turned his beady yellow eyes toward them, licking grease from his thick lips. "Ahhh," he grunted, his voice like rolling thunder, "da little ones are awake."

Hargin growled, struggling against his bonds. "Oi, ye festering pile o' troll droppings, let us go!"

The ogre grinned, revealing rows of crooked, meat-stained teeth. "Ohhh, no, no, no. You stay. You dinner."

Snobbit groaned. "Always the bloody dinner."

The ogre chuckled, grabbing a massive club and resting it across his lap. "I like dwarf. Dwarf is funny." He sniffed the air, then snorted loudly. "Dwarf also smells like beer."

Hargin sneered. "Aye, and if ye let me go, I'll even let ye buy a drink at me shop."

The ogre laughed deeply, shaking his massive belly. "Hahah! Dwarf thinks he clever!"

Snobbit, ever the opportunist, grinned. "Oh, he's real clever. Best brewer in town. Got somethin' called Raging Weasel—knock a full-grown ogre flat."

The ogre's small ears perked up. "Raging Weasel?"

Hargin, catching on, smiled. "Aye, best drink in Mazruth-Kul. Course... ye'd never be able to handle it."

The ogre grunted, sitting up straighter. "Ogre can handle anything!"

Snobbit gave Hargin a side glance. "Is this really our plan?" she muttered.

"Just need 'im distracted," Hargin whispered back. "Ye got a knife?"

Snobbit wriggled her fingers, feeling the small dagger hidden in her sleeve. "Always."

The ogre leaned forward, sniffing loudly. "Mmm. Maybe dwarf make drink after I eat little ones."

Hargin let out a forced laugh. "Aye, or maybe ye let me loose, and I'll give ye a whole barrel. What do ye say?"

The ogre tilted his head. Then he grinned.

"Dwarf funny," he said, lifting his massive club over his head.

"...But not funny enough."

The club came down.

The club came down, missing Hargin's head by mere inches, slamming into the stone floor with a thunderous crack. Dust rained down from the ceiling, and a few goblins near the back scurried away, chittering nervously.

Hargin swallowed, glancing at the crater where his skull could have been. "Right. Time to change tactics."

Snobbit, ever the quick thinker, grinned. "Oi, big guy, before ye turn us into soup, maybe ye'd rather hear a better deal?"

The ogre paused, blinking. "Better... deal?"

Hargin, picking up on the idea, forced a wide, confident smile. “Aye. What if I told ye I ain’t just a brewer, but a very, very rich dwarf?”

The ogre tilted his head, scratching his belly. “Rich? How rich?”

Snobbit spread her arms dramatically. “A thousand gold rich.”

The ogre’s beady yellow eyes widened. His massive ears twitched. He stared at them, mouth slightly open, clearly struggling to comprehend such an enormous sum.

“A thousand?” he repeated. His thick fingers twitched. “Me wants it.”

Snobbit nodded eagerly. “Aye! And ye know what else? If ye let us go, we’ll bring ye even more. Gold, silver, barrels o’ Raging Weasel—enough to make ye rich like a king!”

The ogre froze, his expression slowly shifting from hunger to greed.

Hargin saw his chance. He reached into his belt pouch, pulling out ten gold coins, holding them up between his thick fingers.

“This right here,” he said, his voice smooth, “is a thousand gold. Special gold. Worth more than normal gold.”

The ogre stared at the coins, then snorted loudly. “Bah! Dwarf lies!”

Hargin smiled, shaking his head. “Nah, nah, ye don’t get it, big fella. This ain’t normal gold. This is special noble gold, worth a hundred each! Ye could buy a hundred chickens with just one.”

The ogre’s brows knitted together as he tried to do the math.

Hargin helpfully continued. “That means with all ten, ye could buy... uh... ten cows. Or a thousand chickens!”

The ogre’s mouth slowly dropped open. “A THOUSAND CHICKENS?!”

Snobbit nodded furiously. “Aye! Imagine it—a whole army o’ chickens!”

The ogre let out an excited gasp. He grabbed the coins from Hargin’s hand, staring at them in wonder, his massive fingers struggling to count them properly.

“Me has... one... five... thirty... seven thousand—NO, TEN THOUSAND—NO, ONE THOUSAND!”

Hargin nodded encouragingly. “Aye, one thousand exactly.”

The ogre beamed, bouncing slightly in place. “Me likes! Me wants more!”

Snobbit clapped her hands together. “And ye’ll get more! All ye gotta do is let us go, and we’ll come back with even more gold, cows, chickens, and barrels o’ Raging Weasel!”

The ogre scratched his head, clearly tempted. “Hmm...”

Hargin held his breath.

The ogre grunted, then nodded firmly. “Fine! Me let little ones go... BUT! If ye don’t bring back gold and chickens, me SQUISH ye next time!”

Hargin and Snobbit exchanged glances, then grinned.

“Oh, aye,” Hargin said, rolling his shoulders. “Ye got yerself a deal, big fella.”

The ogre beamed, shoving the ten coins into a filthy sack tied to his belt. He then snapped his fingers, and the goblins rushed forward to cut Hargin and Snobbit loose.

As soon as their ropes fell, Snobbit stretched out her limbs, winking at Hargin. “Well, I gotta say, that was some impressive dwarven swindlin’.”

Hargin grinned. “Aye. And now we run.”

Without waiting for the ogre to change his mind, they bolted for the tunnel exit, leaving behind one very confused but extremely excited ogre, daydreaming about his future chicken empire.

Back at Hargin’s shop, the dwarven alchemist and his halfling accomplice worked quickly, setting up what would be their greatest con yet.

Hargin sat at his wooden counter, grinding a fine white powder in his mortar. “This here’s Dreamroot Powder,” he muttered. “Just a pinch, and a man’ll be snorin’ in his soup.”

Snobbit leaned against the counter, watching. “Aye? And how much ye puttin’ in?”

Hargin grinned, tossing in a full handful. “Enough to knock out an entire tavern.”

He mixed the powder into a small bottle, then poured it into a barrel of Raging Weasel, swirling the liquid until it fully dissolved. The concoction would be strong enough to put an ogre on his back—and hopefully keep him there long enough for them to get what they came for.

Next, Hargin grabbed a set of vials, pouring out a thick yellow substance.

Snobbit sniffed the air and wrinkled her nose. “Ugh! Smells like boiled piss.”

Hargin chuckled. “Aye, cause it’s meant to! This is Fool’s Gold Paint. Ye splash this on regular stones, and they shine like nuggets o’ gold.”

Together, they spent the next hour painting rocks, carefully layering the fake gold shimmer onto each one before stuffing them into a large sack.

Meanwhile, Snobbit ran to the Market Square, returning shortly after with four clucking chickens, stuffed inside a wooden crate.

When all was ready, they loaded the barrel, sack of “gold,” and chickens onto a hand cart, then set off back to the mines—their plan set, their deception polished.

The journey through the dark tunnels was quicker this time, as they knew the path well. It didn’t take long before goblin voices echoed ahead, and soon enough, half a dozen of the little green fiends blocked their way.

“Oi!” Snobbit called. “We’re here fer yer boss. Let’s not keep ‘im waitin’.”

The goblins snickered but ultimately led them through the tunnels, deeper into the ogre’s den.

When they arrived, the massive brute was already grinning, seated upon a pile of half-chewed bones and tattered blankets.

“Ahh! Little gold givers return!” the ogre bellowed, his belly shaking. “Me waited long time! Where is me treasure?!”

Snobbit nudged Hargin, who stepped forward, chest puffed out. “As promised, we brought ye only the best.”

He unfastened the sack, letting the painted yellow stones spill out in a shimmering pile.

The ogre’s eyes widened, his massive hands grabbing fistfuls of fake nuggets, his mouth practically watering. “Ohhh... so shiny... so much gold...”

Hargin nodded seriously. “Aye. These nuggets? They’re worth more than regular coins! Nobles would kill fer ‘em!”

The ogre drooled, staring at his “wealth.” “Me gonna be rich...”

Snobbit, standing beside the crate of chickens, lifted the lid. “An’ here’s the first batch o’ yer army. Four chickens. We couldn’t carry more, but the rest are comin’ tonight.”

The ogre clapped his hands, delighted. “CHICKENS!”

The goblins cheered, already chasing one of the terrified birds around the cavern.

Hargin patted the barrel of Raging Weasel. “An’ of course, what’s a rich ogre without a drink fit for a king?”

The ogre’s grin widened. He ripped off the barrel lid and tipped it straight into his mouth, gulping down great swigs.

The goblins, not wanting to be left out, began taking turns drinking as well, passing a wooden mug between them.

Hargin and Snobbit watched patiently, waiting as the sleeping powder did its work.

The ogre drank... and drank... and drank.

His massive body swayed slightly, his eyelids fluttering, but still, he kept drinking.

Then, after one final swig, he let out a massive belch and slumped backward, his entire body crashing into his nest of rags and bones.

The goblins giggled drunkenly, swaying as they tried to stand—one collapsed onto another, and soon they were all snoring.

Snobbit let out a low whistle, nudging Hargin. “Aye, that worked faster than I thought.”

Hargin smiled, rolling up his sleeves. “Then let’s not waste time. We got loot to take.”

The cavern was silent, save for the deep rumbling snores of the ogre and his goblins. The stench of cheap ale, drool, and sweat filled the air.

Hargin and Snobbit stood over the massive sleeping brute, blades in hand.

Snobbit glanced at Hargin. “Ye sure about this? We could just sneak away.”

Hargin tightened his grip on his dagger. “Aye, and wait fer him to wake up an’ hunt us down? Not a chance.”

With a quick, practiced motion, he plunged the blade into the ogre’s thick throat, dragging it across in a deep, clean cut.

The beast gurgled once, body spasming slightly, before falling still—lifeless.

Snobbit exhaled, wiping her blade on the ogre’s rags. “Well, that’s done.”

Hargin nodded, turning toward the chest near the ogre’s nest. With a grunt, he flipped it open.

Inside, piled in dirty rags and old sacks, were gold and silver nuggets—not the fool’s gold they had painted, but real, heavy, precious metal.

Snobbit whistled low. “That’s a fine haul.”

They dumped the contents into their large sack, stuffing every last nugget before slinging it over Hargin’s shoulder. It was heavy as hell, but worth it.

With one last glance at the goblin horde snoring on the floor, they crept out of the cave, leaving behind the carnage, the stench, and the poor fools who had bet on greed.

Back home, Hargin wasted no time.

In the workshop behind his shop, he stoked the furnace, the heat roaring as he tossed the nuggets into a heavy iron crucible. The gold and silver slowly melted, pooling into a shimmering liquid.

For six straight hours, Hargin worked the metal, pouring it into small bar molds, cooling them in a bucket of water, and carefully stacking the finished bars.

Snobbit, lounging nearby with a mug of Raging Weasel, watched the process with amusement. “Ye look like a proper dwarven smith now.”

Hargin grunted, wiping sweat from his forehead. “Aye, but instead o’ weapons, I’m makin’ retirement coin.”

The next morning, Hargin loaded the gold and silver bars onto a small cart and made his way to Hulvar’s Goldsmithery, one of the finest establishments in Mazruth-Kul.

The shop smelled of polished wood, burning candle wax, and freshly worked metal. Old furniture filled the space, and behind a sturdy glass counter, rows of rings, necklaces, lockets, and fine silver trinkets lay displayed.

Mounted on the walls were trophies of Hulvar’s hunting days—a wolf’s head and a massive bear skull, its teeth still sharp.

Hulvar himself stood behind the counter, a small old fellow, his thick glasses tied behind his head with a thin cord. His greasy black hair was combed to the left, and his moustache twitched as he examined a half-finished silver ring.

His wrinkled fingers, covered in small silver rings, adjusted the lens of his spectacles as he squinted at Hargin.

“Ahh, Master Ironheart,” Hulvar said in a thin, reedy voice. “What fine business brings you to my humble shop?”

Hargin dropped the first gold bar onto the counter with a heavy thud. “Gold.”

Hulvar’s eyes widened, and he hurriedly set his tools down, adjusting his glasses. “Ohhh... my, my, my.”

Hargin smiled. “An’ silver, too.”

Hulvar licked his lips, greed flashing in his eyes as he examined each small, neatly poured bar.

“I assume you wish to sell?”

Hargin nodded. “Aye. Fair price, mind ye.”

Hulvar smiled, ever the merchant, and the haggling began.

The old goldsmith tried to lowball him, talking of “market fluctuations” and “impurities in unrefined bars”, but Hargin was no fool. The dwarf stood his ground, countering every excuse, threatening to take his business elsewhere.

Eventually, after much back-and-forth, Hulvar sighed and counted out 750 gold coins, stacking them neatly into pouches.

“A fair deal,” Hulvar admitted, though his tight expression suggested he hated losing the extra coin.

Hargin grinned, scooping up the pouches. “Pleasure doin’ business, Hulvar.”

That evening, Hargin sat in his study, a mug of Raging Weasel in one hand, his pipe in the other. He exhaled a slow, satisfied puff of smoke, stroking Squeek as the rat curled up on his shoulder.

Snobbit sat across from him, feet kicked up on the table, swirling her own mug of liquor.

“Well,” she said, grinning, “that was one hell of an errand.”

Hargin clinked his mug against hers. “Aye. An’ we lived to tell the tale.”

They drank deep, the warmth of success settling into their bones.

Hargin stirred the bubbling concoction in his cauldron, his thick fingers carefully adjusting the heat of the blue-green liquid swirling inside the iron pot. A faint shimmer rippled across the surface—a sign that the potion was nearly ready.

"Ye sure this'll work?" Snobbit asked, leaning over the counter, watching the brew with narrowed eyes. "Never heard of ye makin’ an invisibility potion before."

Hargin snorted, grabbing a vial and carefully pouring the potion into it. "That’s because I don’t make ‘em often. Too tricky. Too expensive. And this batch’ll only last ye ten minutes."

Snobbit raised a brow. “Ten?! That’s barely enough time to pick me teeth.”

Hargin grumbled, corking the vial. "Then best ye be quick with yer hands, lass."

The target was Lady Celistra du Coin, the elven coinlender who owned half the debts in Mazruth-Kul. Wealthy, ruthless, and obsessed with exotic alchemical ingredients, she kept a private vault of rare herbs and powders locked within her estate.

Hargin needed those ingredients.

Snobbit needed the challenge.

And if they pulled this off, they’d both be a lot richer.

Under the cover of night, Snobbit slipped through the alleyways of Mazruth-Kul, her cloak wrapped tightly around her, the vial of invisibility potion tucked safely at her side.

Lady Celistra’s estate was a walled-off, two-story manor perched on a hill, guarded by hired mercenaries clad in dark leather armor. They weren’t city watch—they were private guards trained to deal with thieves.

Snobbit crouched near the outer wall, scanning the grounds. A dog patrolled the garden, its ears twitching at every sound.

She uncorked the vial, muttering, "Cheers to trouble," before gulping it down.

A strange chill ran through her veins, her skin tingling as the magic took effect. She looked down—

And saw nothing.

A wide grin spread across her unseen face. "Well, ain't that somethin'."

She scaled the wall, slipping past the guards with ease, careful not to disturb loose stones.

Once inside, she moved quickly. The potion's effects wouldn't last forever.

The grand hallway was lined with thick carpets, which muffled her steps as she crept past gleaming suits of elven armor and oil paintings of Celistra's ancestors. The air smelled of fine perfume, parchment, and burning incense.

Snobbit moved toward the study, where Celistra kept her vault hidden behind a bookshelf.

She could already hear two guards talking near the doorway.

"Lady Celistra's paranoid," one muttered. "Said she 'felt something off' tonight. Ordered us to check for magical disturbances."

The other scoffed. "No one's dumb enough to rob her. Not after what happened to the last guy."

Snobbit grinned to herself. "Oh, lads, ye have no idea."

Carefully slipping past the guards, she reached the large mahogany bookshelf at the far end of the room.

She traced her fingers along the spines of the books—until she found it.

"The Art of Coin and Power."

Snobbit smiled. "Bit on the nose, ain't it?"

She pulled the book, and with a soft click, the bookshelf swung open, revealing a hidden steel vault embedded in the wall.

Her fingers worked quickly, pulling out her lockpicks, her heart hammering as she listened to every tiny movement within the tumblers.

The first click came fast. The second took longer.

Her time was running out.

Finally—a last, satisfying click.

The vault swung open, revealing rows of glass jars filled with rare herbs, powders, and enchanted tinctures.

"Jackpot," Snobbit whispered, grabbing what she needed.

Then her eyes caught something else—a small black box, inlaid with silver runes.

She hesitated.

Hargin would kill her if she took anything unnecessary.

But Snobbit was, if nothing else, a gambler.

She grabbed it.

As she turned to leave, she felt the magic of the potion begin to wear off—her fingers reappearing, her arms flickering back into view.

"Bugger."

She had seconds left.

Moving fast, she slipped out of the vault, closed the bookshelf behind her, and hurried back toward the main hall.

Then she heard it—

“WHAT WAS THAT?”

The guards.

They had heard the vault close.

Snobbit ran.

Boots thundered behind her, voices shouting commands.

She leapt down a side corridor, knocking over a silver candelabra to slow them down.

The exit was just ahead—

Then she rounded the corner and nearly slammed into Lady Celistra herself.

The elven noblewoman stood in the archway, dressed in silk robes, her sharp green eyes locking onto Snobbit instantly.

There was no recognition in her face. Not yet. But there was curiosity—a strange glimmer, like a cat watching a mouse.

Snobbit didn't wait to find out what came next.

She bolted past her, diving through an open window, rolling as she hit the ground outside.

By the time the guards rushed after her, she was already halfway down the hill, sprinting toward the city streets.

Hargin paced the shop floor, muttering curses, glancing at the bubbling antidote he had prepared—just in case Snobbit had botched the potion and ended up cursed.

The front door slammed open.

Snobbit stumbled in, breathless, clutching a bag full of ingredients—and one mysterious black box.

Hargin stopped pacing. “What. Did. Ye. Do?”

Snobbit grinned, dumping the bag onto the counter. “Got what ye asked for. And a little extra.”

Hargin eyed the black box suspiciously. “Ye couldn’t help yerself, could ye?”

Snobbit shrugged. “When luck presents itself, ye don’t ask questions.”

Hargin sighed, rubbing his temples. “Lass... if that thing’s cursed, ye’ll be sleepin’ in the alley.”

Snobbit laughed, plopping into a chair. “Fine by me. Just as long as I get a mug o’ Raging Weasel first.”

Hargin chuckled, shaking his head. “Aye, ye earned it.”

A Noble Scheme

The flickering lanternlight in Hargin’s shop cast long shadows across the wooden counter, where a small velvet pouch sat, heavy with gold coins. Across from it, wrapped in a fine cloak of deep crimson, sat Lord Edric Vaulmont, a man known for his wealth, his sharp dealings, and now, his desperation.

Hargin leaned forward, pipe clenched between his teeth. “Ye do understand what ye’re askin’ me, aye?”

Vaulmont’s fingers drummed against the counter, his finely manicured nails clicking in rhythm. “I understand the risks,” he said smoothly, his voice as polished as his gold rings. “That’s why I came to you.”

Hargin exhaled a slow puff of smoke. “Aye? An’ why’s that?”

The noble smiled, thin and knowing. “Because you’re not a common thug. You don’t make blunt poisons that leave obvious corpses. You create... art.”

Snobbit, lounging on a stool nearby, snorted. “Call it art if ye want, but it still kills ye the same.”

Vaulmont’s smile didn’t waver. “Precisely why I need the best.” He folded his hands. “The poison must be slow, undetectable. It must mimic a fatal illness—nothing that would cause immediate alarm.”

Hargin stroked his beard, considering. “An’ the target?”

Vaulmont’s jaw tightened. “Lord Alistair Renoux. He has been meddling in trade routes, bribing city officials to gain exclusive contracts. He threatens my business, my standing—my family’s legacy.”

Hargin knew the name well. Renoux was a merchant lord with deep connections in the city, a man who had crushed rivals before without a second thought.

The gold in the pouch glinted temptingly. More than Hargin had seen in years. Enough to secure his shop for life.

He tapped his fingers on the table. “Fine,” he muttered. “I’ll do it. But on my terms.”

Vaulmont’s smile widened slightly. “Go on.”

Hargin stood and walked to his workbench, scanning his shelves. “Ye’ll get yer poison, but it won’t be a quick one. Takes time to make somethin’ that kills slow an’ clean.”

He pulled down a small glass jar of Widow’s Kiss petals, one of the key ingredients.

“Three weeks,” Hargin continued. “That’s how long it’ll take for yer merchant to start feelin’ ill. Fever. Weakness. Doctors’ll say it’s his own body givin’ out. An’ within a month? Dead.”

Vaulmont nodded approvingly. “That will suffice.”

Hargin glanced at Snobbit. “An’ we’ll need a way to get it into his food or drink.”

Snobbit grinned, twirling her dagger. “Ye know me. I can slip past any lock, any guard.”

Vaulmont reached into his cloak and placed a small brass key on the table. “This opens Lord Renoux’s wine cellar. He drinks only from his personal reserves. If your halfling can administer the poison there, he’ll consume it nightly, never suspecting a thing.”

Hargin picked up the key, weighing it in his palm. “Aye. That’ll do.”

Vaulmont stood, smoothing his cloak. “Then we have an agreement. The moment Renoux is dead, you will receive triple this amount.” He gestured to the gold pouch, then turned toward the door.

Before stepping out, he glanced over his shoulder. “Be careful, Master Ironheart. Renoux has powerful allies. If you fail, you won’t live long enough to regret it.”

With that, he vanished into the night.

Hargin and Snobbit sat in silence for a long moment.

Snobbit kicked her feet up onto the counter, smiling. “Well, that was dramatic.”

Hargin exhaled deeply, rolling his shoulders. “Aye. But this ain’t just some heist or trickery, lass. This is playin’ in the big leagues now.”

Snobbit tilted her head. “Second thoughts?”

Hargin looked at the gold, then at the vial of Widow’s Kiss petals in his hand.

“...Nah.”

He got to work.

Hargin stood before his alchemy bench, the dim lanternlight flickering over the array of glass vials, dried herbs, and bubbling flasks. The air smelled of crushed petals, damp earth, and something faintly metallic.

He rolled up his sleeves, fingers tracing over each ingredient laid out before him. This wasn’t like brewing a hangover cure or a simple pain tonic—this was death, bottled and refined.

He exhaled, steadying his hands. “No room for mistakes.”

The Ingredients of a Perfect Murder. Widow’s Kiss Petals – The core of the poison, causing gradual organ failure masked as a natural illness. Nettlewhisper Root – Ensures the poison is odorless and tasteless. Graycap Spores – Weakens the body over time, sapping energy and causing fever. Ironleaf Resin – Ensures the poison binds to fermented drinks, making it undetectable in wine.

He worked in silence, grinding the dried petals into a fine, violet powder, then carefully dissolving them in a low simmering tincture of Graycap extract. The mixture darkened, taking on a murky red hue, blending seamlessly with wine.

As he stirred, Snobbit sat on the counter, tossing a dagger between her hands. “So this fella’s gonna die slow, aye?”

Hargin grunted. “A month. Starts with weakness. A fever. By week three, he’ll barely be standin’. When he drops dead, his own healers will swear it was illness.”

Snobbit whistled. “Brutal. I like it.”

Hargin poured the final brew into a small glass vial, corking it tight. He turned to Snobbit, holding it up.

“Now it’s up to ye, lass.”

Snobbit crouched in the shadows of Lord Renoux’s estate, her breath slow and steady. The high stone walls loomed over her, torches flickering in the guards’ watchtowers. Rain drizzled lightly, dampening the air, muffling sound—a perfect night for thievery and murder.

She pressed herself against the wall as a guard passed by, heavy boots squelching in the wet dirt. As soon as he turned the corner, she scaled the wall, hands and feet finding the old cracks in the stone.

A moment later, she was inside the courtyard.

The estate was quiet, save for the distant murmur of drunken laughter from the main hall. Renoux was hosting a feast—the perfect excuse for Snobbit to slip inside unnoticed.

Moving low and quick, she made her way toward the wine cellar doors, avoiding floorboards that creaked and the flickering lanternlight of patrolling guards.

She reached the cellar entrance, slipping the brass key from her pouch. The lock clicked open.

Step one, done.

She descended into the cool darkness of the wine cellar, the scent of oak, aged grape, and damp stone filling her nose. Rows of barrels and bottles lined the walls, each meticulously labeled.

She moved quickly, scanning the labels until she found Renoux’s private stock—a row of deep crimson bottles imported from the eastern provinces.

Snobbit pulled out the poison vial.

“This is the part where I don’t screw up,” she muttered.

With practiced hands, she uncorked the bottles one by one, dripping a few drops of the poison into each, swirling them carefully before sealing them again.

Snobbit worked quick and clean, her fingers moving without hesitation. Each drop of Blackvein Tincture swirled into the wine like a whisper of death, dissolving instantly in the deep crimson liquid.

She had poisoned five bottles before she heard it.

Footsteps.

Coming down the stone staircase.

Snobbit’s muscles tensed, her heart hammering in her chest. She slid into the shadows between the barrels, pressing herself flat against the cool stone wall.

A single guard entered, carrying a lantern. His heavy boots echoed through the cellar, the light casting long, flickering shadows.

Snobbit clenched her dagger, ready to act.

The guard yawned, rubbing his eyes. He wasn't on alert, just making a routine check. He moved toward the wine rack, muttering to himself.

"Damn nobles... Always needin' their drinks at the godsdamned worst hours..."

He reached for one of the bottles—one of the poisoned ones.

Snobbit held her breath.

But instead of uncorking it, he sighed, adjusted the bottles slightly, then turned away. He didn't even notice the difference.

Snobbit exhaled slowly, waiting as the guard lumbered back up the stairs, his lantern glow fading.

The moment the door creaked shut, Snobbit moved.

She slipped back to the bottles, carefully adjusting them to exactly how they were before—no signs of tampering, no reason for anyone to check.

Then, silent as a ghost, she made her way back to the entrance.

Step two—done.

Snobbit locked the cellar door behind her, slipping the key back into her pouch.

The estate was still alive with drunken voices, guests toasting Renoux's wealth and success. A few servants hurried past, balancing trays of roast meats and expensive wines—none the wiser that their master's death was already sealed.

She moved through the halls unnoticed, avoiding open corridors and well-lit stairways.

Almost out.

Then—a voice.

"Hey! You there!"

Snobbit froze.

She turned, putting on her best innocent grin, and found herself face-to-face with a guard, his hand already on the hilt of his sword.

The guard narrowed his eyes, taking in the small cloaked figure standing before him. She had no business skulking about the halls, and he knew it.

Snobbit raised her hands in an innocent gesture, flashing a nervous grin. “Oi, oi, now. No need for stabby business. I ain’t here to nick silverware.”

The guard’s frown deepened. “Then what are you doing here?”

Snobbit huffed, shifting the small cloth-wrapped bundle she carried under one arm. “Deliverin’ a damn cake.” She jutted her chin toward the grand hall, where laughter and music still carried through the air. “Some posh noble’s got a sweet tooth, an’ the kitchen steward sent me up ‘ere ‘cause the staff’s too busy stuffin’ goose guts.”

The guard’s suspicion lingered, his eyes flicking to the bundle. “Cake?”

Snobbit rolled her eyes, holding it up. “Aye. Almond and honey, fancy stuff. Straight from the baker’s.” She sighed dramatically. “

The guard muttered a curse under his breath. “Bloody kitchen staff. Never tellin’ us nothin’.” He waved a dismissive hand, clearly not interested in questioning a servant over desserts. “Fine. Get on with it.”

Snobbit grinned. “Aye, aye. No need to tell me twice.”

And just like that, she slipped away.

Hargin sat in his shop, staring at the half-full bottle of Raging Weasel in front of him, his fingers drumming impatiently on the wooden counter.

The door creaked open, and Snobbit slipped inside.

Hargin exhaled, setting his drink down. “About time.”

Snobbit leaned against the counter, smiling. “Relax. Went smooth as silk.”

Hargin raised a brow, eyeing the cut on her sleeve. “Aye? That why ye look like ye almost got stabbed?”

Snobbit grinned, flopping into a chair. “Only almost. No big deal.”

Hargin shook his head, pouring her a drink. “Here’s to a clean job.”

Snobbit clinked her mug against his, taking a deep swig.

The job was done and they got paid. Now all they had to do... was wait.

Guild

Hargin strode through the Guild District of Mazruth-Kul, his boots thudding against the damp cobblestones. The air here was thick with the scent of ink and parchment, of burning oils and strange chemicals. Towering stone buildings loomed over the streets, their banners displaying sigils of the various crafting guilds—the Smith’s Anvil, the Merchant’s Ledger, the Glassblower’s Flame, and, of course, the Twin Serpents of the Alchemist’s Guild.

The guildhall itself stood apart from the others—a tall, narrow structure of dark stone, its upper floors lined with arched windows, from which strange-colored smoke occasionally billowed. A carved brass door, etched with arcane symbols of transformation and balance, loomed before him.

He pushed it open and entered.

Inside, the scent of boiling tinctures and drying herbs filled his nostrils. Shelves lined with alchemical ingredients and glassware ran the length of the chamber, while robed figures moved about, examining bubbling flasks and recording notes in thick leather tomes.

A thin, bespectacled clerk looked up from behind the counter. “Business?”

Hargin grunted. “Here to join the guild.”

The clerk arched an eyebrow, adjusting his spectacles. “Then you’ll need to speak to Guildmaster Alvaric. Follow me.”

The clerk led him up a winding stairwell to a spacious study lined with bookshelves, scroll cases, and cabinets filled with glowing vials and rare minerals. At the center of the room, seated behind an ornate wooden desk, was Guildmaster Alvaric.

Alvaric was an aging human, his long silver hair tied back, his robes embroidered with golden runes. His fingers, adorned with rings of alchemical significance, drummed lightly on the desk as he examined Hargin with piercing gray eyes.

“So,” Alvaric said in a deep, steady voice. “You wish to join the Alchemist’s Guild of Mazruth-Kul?”

Hargin crossed his arms, meeting the guildmaster’s gaze. “Aye. I do.”

Alvaric studied him for a long moment, then nodded. “Then you must first prove yourself. Alchemy is not for amateurs, nor fools. You will undergo three tests—one for knowledge, one for application, and one for intuition. If you succeed, you may sign your name in our Guild Ledger.”

Hargin grunted. “Fine by me.”

Hargin was led into a stone-walled laboratory, where three senior alchemists stood waiting, their robes marked with the silver insignia of the guild. A heavy oak table lay before them, set with various herbs, minerals, and glass instruments.

A dark-haired elven alchemist, Mistress Selyna, stepped forward. She carried a wooden tray lined with dried plants and powders.

“This is a test of herbal knowledge,” she said, placing the tray down. “You will name five of these ingredients, describe their properties, and explain how they are used in alchemy.”

Hargin examined the tray, rubbing his thick black beard.

He pointed to a deep blue leaf. “That’s Ironleaf—used to bind potions to the bloodstream, makes ‘em last longer.”

Next, he tapped a small bundle of purple petals. “Widow’s Kiss. Toxic in large doses. Causes slow organ failure, used in poisons.”

A pinch of golden powder—“That’s Sunflare Dust. Found in volcanic regions. Used in fire-based alchemy.”

A shriveled black root—“That’s Dewfern. Bitter as hell, but helps with stomach ailments.”

Finally, he pointed at a small vial of shimmering liquid. “Mooncap Essence. Makes a tincture glow. Helps with night-vision potions.”

Selyna nodded in approval. “Correct. You pass.”

A burly dwarf alchemist, Master Gundrik, stepped forward. “Now,” he rumbled, “we test yer hands-on skill.”

He placed a set of ingredients on the table.

“Brew me a basic Healing Draught—no more, no less.”

Hargin rolled up his sleeves, grabbed a pestle and mortar, and got to work.

He crushed Ironleaf to extract its essence, then ground Dewfern Root into a fine powder. Heating a small flask of springwater, he stirred in Mooncap Essence to stabilize the mixture. After ten minutes of precise boiling and stirring, the liquid turned a faint gold.

Hargin took the smallest sip, checking the texture. Satisfied, he poured it into a vial and placed it down.

Gundrik inspected it, sniffed it, then nodded. “Not bad. You pass.”

Guildmaster Alvaric stepped forward, holding a small, sealed vial filled with a dark, swirling liquid.

“This is your final test,” he said. “Tell me: What is this potion?”

Hargin picked up the vial, swirling the liquid inside. He sniffed it lightly, catching a faint metallic scent. Then he held it to the light, watching how the color shifted.

His eyes narrowed. “This is a failed potion,” he muttered. “It was supposed to be an Elixir of Stoneflesh—but ye used too much Frostbloom, and now it’ll weaken the drinker instead of strengthen ‘em.”

Alvaric’s lips curved into a small smile. “Correct. You pass.”

Hargin sighed, relieved, as the guildmaster gestured him forward.

“Sign your name in the Guild Ledger,” Alvaric said. “From this day forward, you are an Alchemist of Mazruth-Kul.”

Later, in Alvaric’s study, the guildmaster poured two glasses of deep amber liquor, offering one to Hargin.

“You have talent,” he said, sipping his drink. “But talent alone is not enough. Alchemy is a lifelong pursuit. If you wish to improve, you must study further.”

He reached into a cabinet, pulling out a list of recommended tomes.

Alvaric’s Suggested Readings: "The Art of Transmutation" by Master Eldrin Fallow. "The Codex of Hidden Reagents" by Lady Veshara Thornquill. "Essence and Extraction: A Brewer’s Guide" by Tomas Wrenwick. "Fire, Ice, and Alchemical Reaction" by Gundrik Stoneflask. "The Forbidden Poisons" (author unknown, kept under lock and key)

Hargin took the list, tucking it into his coat. “Aye, I’ll get readin’.”

Alvaric nodded. “And should you ever require rare ingredients—Black Lotus, Drakesalt, Shadowroot—you may request them from the guild. For a price, of course.”

Hargin smiled. “Course.”

Alvaric leaned back. “Welcome to the Brotherhood of Alchemists, Hargin Ironheart. Let’s hope ye don’t blow yerself up.”

Hargin chuckled, raising his glass. “Aye. Let’s hope.”

Hargin sat across from Guildmaster Alvaric, the two of them separated by a massive wooden desk strewn with open books, vials of strange-colored liquids, and alchemical symbols carved deep into the surface. The air in the chamber smelled of aged parchment, burning incense, and something faintly metallic.

Alvaric, sipping from his glass of dark amber liquor, studied Hargin with sharp, calculating eyes. The guildmaster’s silver hair caught the candlelight, giving him the look of a man half-scholar, half-sorcerer.

Hargin leaned back in his chair, swirling his own drink. “So, Guildmaster,” he said, “I passed yer tests. I’m in the guild. But I don’t know a damned thing about you. What’s yer story?”

Alvaric let out a low chuckle, setting his glass down. “A fair question. Most don’t ask.”

He folded his hands. “I was born far from Mazruth-Kul, in the Ivory Spires of Varethis—a city where alchemy is treated as an artform, a sacred science. My father was a royal alchemist, one of the King’s personal scholars, but his ambitions... well, they outgrew his loyalty.”

Hargin arched a brow. “Sounds like a tale worth hearin’.”

Alvaric’s gaze darkened. “He believed in breaking the limits of mortality. That a man could transcend the boundaries of flesh if he refined his elixirs enough. He made bold claims, dangerous ones—until the King’s court branded him a heretic.”

He leaned back, fingers tapping the desk. “One night, he vanished—his workshop burned to the ground. I was barely a man when I fled Varethis, carrying his journals, his unfinished works, and his debts.”

Hargin let out a low whistle. “So ye ended up here?”

Alvaric nodded. “Mazruth-Kul was... welcoming. I proved my worth to the guild, climbed the ranks. Now, here I sit—the master of what I once sought as an outsider.”

Hargin smiled. “Aye, funny how that works.”

Alvaric watched him closely. “And what about you, Master Ironheart? You carry no formal schooling, no guild connections before today. Yet you brew like a man who’s been at it his whole life.”

Hargin grunted. “My granddda was a healer. Old bastard knew his plants, his roots, his tinctures. But he weren’t a fancy scholar. He learned it all in the mountains, by hand. That’s how I learned, too.”

Alvaric gave a knowing nod. “Sometimes, those who study outside the walls of the academy prove to be the finest of all.”

He steepled his fingers. “Tell me, now that you bear the sigil of the guild, what is it you seek?”

Hargin set his empty glass on the desk. “Aye, well, now that ye mention it, ye said the guild’s got access to... certain materials.”

Alvaric smiled. “That we do.” He reached into a drawer, pulling out a small metal token etched with the Twin Serpents of the Guild. He slid it across the table.

“This is a Guild Procurer’s Mark. Flash it at our supply houses, and you can purchase ingredients unavailable to common merchants.”

Hargin picked it up, running his thumb over the engraving. “What kind o’ goods are we talkin’?”

Alvaric's eyes glinted. "You'll find stockpiles of rare herbs, purified metals, magical solvents, and poisons that most would never dare sell openly. If you require something... particularly exotic, we can arrange it—for the right price."

Hargin nodded slowly, slipping the token into his pocket. "Aye, I reckon that'll come in handy."

Hargin stretched in his chair. "So, what's the story of this guild, then? Ye lot have been here a while?"

Alvaric's expression turned thoughtful. He stood, walking to a large wooden cabinet, opening it to reveal an aged manuscript, its leather cover cracked with age.

"This guild," he murmured, "was founded nearly two hundred years ago—not as a scholarly order, but as a secret society."

Hargin raised a brow. "A secret society?"

Alvaric nodded, flipping through the manuscript's brittle pages. "In the early days of Mazruth-Kul, alchemy was seen as a dangerous art, often accused of heresy and sorcery. The first alchemists here had to operate in the shadows, selling their elixirs and potions in hidden markets."

He tapped a passage of faded script. "It was only after the Plague of Withering swept through the city—when alchemists were the only ones who could cure the disease—that they were finally granted legal status."

Hargin grunted. "So the city needed ye, an' suddenly ye weren't outlaws anymore?"

Alvaric smiled. "Precisely."

He closed the book. "Since then, the guild has grown into a pillar of Mazruth-Kul, respected by nobles and feared by those who underestimate our influence."

Hargin chuckled. "Aye, alchemists an' power always seem to go hand in hand."

Alvaric poured himself another drink, then held the bottle toward Hargin. "Welcome to the fold, Master Ironheart. May your work bring you both knowledge and fortune."

Hargin smiled, raising his glass. "Aye, let's hope neither o' those gets me killed first."

The hearth burned bright, casting flickering shadows across the cozy interior of Hargin's shop. The scent of burning oak and roasting pipeweed mingled with the rich, heady aroma of Raging Weasel, the two of them nursing their drinks in the warm glow of success.

Snobbit sat cross-legged on a low wooden stool, feet propped up on a crate, twirling a dagger idly between her fingers. Hargin sat in his massive armchair, puffing on his clay pipe, exhaling slow curls of earthy smoke.

“Well,” Snobbit said, raising her mug, “here’s to the newest bastard in the Alchemist’s Guild.”

Hargin smiled, clinking his own mug against hers. “Aye, an’ to my fine, honorable assistant.”

Snobbit snorted. “Honorable? Ye sure ye ain’t drunk already?”

Hargin let out a low chuckle, taking a deep pull from his pipe, the fragrant smoke curling through his thick beard. “Aye, maybe. But I mean it. This guild thing’s gonna open doors fer us. We get supplies, connections, an’ more work than we know what to do with.”

Snobbit took a swig of her drink. “Aye. Long as it don’t land us in a dungeon or a grave.”

Hargin waved a calloused hand. “Bah, I like our odds. We’re survivors.” He studied her over his mug, eyes squinting slightly in the firelight.

“Speakin’ o’ survival... I just realized I don’t know a damn thing about you.”

Snobbit raised a brow, taking another sip. “Oh, aye? Well, I ain’t that interestin’.”

Hargin grunted. “I don’t believe that fer a second.” He leaned forward, resting his forearms on his knees. “Where’d ye come from, lass?”

Snobbit leaned back, stretching. “Well now, since ye asked so nicely...” She set her mug down and smiled. “Ye ever been to Redmire?”

Hargin frowned. “That pisshole o’ a city up north? Aye, I’ve been through it. Didn’t stay long.”

Snobbit grinned, tapping her chest. “Aye, well, I’m a Redmire brat. Born an’ raised. If ye ain’t familiar, it’s a place where ye either get tough or get robbed blind.”

She rolled her shoulders. “Never knew me folks. Some say they were thieves, others say they were just dead. Either way, I was runnin’ the streets by the time I could walk. Learned how to slip a purse, climb a wall, an’ lie me way out o’ trouble before I ever learned how to read.”

Hargin smiled. “Aye, that tracks.”

Snobbit shrugged. “Made meself useful to the right people, did a few jobs that went sideways, made a few enemies. One night, I lifted a coinpurse off a drunk merchant—didn’t know he had hired blades watchin’ him.”

Hargin grunted. “Let me guess. Didn’t end well?”

Snobbit chuckled darkly. “Oh, it ended, all right—with me divin’ into the river, swimmin’ half a mile in the dark, an’ crawlin’ out smellin’ like sewer muck.” She stretched her arms behind her head. “Figured it was time fer a change o’ scenery. So I hopped a wagon, landed in Mazruth-Kul, an’ well... here I am.”

Hargin nodded slowly. “So ye just happened to show up an’ decide to be an apprentice herbalist, eh?”

Snobbit laughed. “Not exactly. Needed coin, saw ye puttin’ up signs, an’ figured ‘Hey, why not? A job’s a job.’ Turns out, I don’t hate it.”

Hargin chuckled. “That’s the highest praise I think I’ll ever get from ye.”

Snobbit smiled. “Damn right.” She took another deep drink, then glanced at him over the rim of her mug.

“A’right, Ironheart. My turn. Where the hell do ye come from?”

Hargin exhaled slowly, tapping his pipe against the edge of his chair, knocking out the ashes. He stared into the fire for a moment before speaking.

“Ye know me grandda left me this house, aye?”

Snobbit nodded.

“Well, he weren’t the only Ironheart in the world. I weren’t born here. I’m from the mountain city of Kargun-Dhur.”

Snobbit’s brows raised slightly. “Kargun-Dhur? That’s a fair ways east. What brought ye here?”

Hargin let out a low breath. “Family.” He took a sip of his drink, shaking his head. “Me old man was a stoneworker—a damned good one. Me ma? A herbalist. Good folk, both of ‘em. But the mountains ain’t always kind.”

His fingers curled around his mug. “A mine collapse took me father when I was still a lad. Me ma held on a few years after that, but... she got sick. Real sick. No priest, no healer could fix it.” His jaw clenched slightly. “Did what I could, but it weren’t enough.”

Snobbit was silent for a moment, watching him.

“So ye left?”

Hargin nodded slowly. “Aye. Nothin’ left fer me there. No guild, no legacy, no family. But me **grandda had always spoken of this place—Mazruth-Kul. Said he lived here in his younger days, before he left to go back to the mountains.”

He took another long swig of Raging Weasel, letting the burn settle in his chest.

“When he died, the old bastard left me this house, this shop, an’ just enough coin to get started. So I figured, why not?”

Snobbit smiled. “An’ now ye’re a respected alchemist an’ occasional criminal.”

Hargin let out a deep chuckle. “Aye, that about sums it up.”

They sat in companionable silence, the fire crackling beside them, the weight of old memories settling into the warmth of the room.

Snobbit kicked her feet up. “Y’know, Hargin... I think we make a good pair.”

Hargin grinned, raising his mug. “Aye, lass. That we do.”

A few days later Hargin made his way through the Guild District, his boots splashing through shallow puddles left from the morning rain. The city’s familiar scents of burning tallow, baked bread, and damp stone filled the streets, but as he neared the Alchemist’s Guildhall, another smell cut through the air—acidic, sharp, and unsettlingly unnatural.

Hargin made his way through the Guild District, his boots splashing through shallow puddles left from the morning rain. The city’s familiar scents of burning tallow, baked bread, and damp stone filled the streets, but as he neared the Alchemist’s Guildhall, another smell cut through the air—acidic, sharp, and unsettlingly unnatural.

A thick greenish mist coiled around the guild’s upper windows, curling like ghostly tendrils into the open sky. Hargin frowned, quickening his pace.

Inside, the usual hushed murmurs of alchemists at work had been replaced with frantic voices and the sound of hurried footsteps. Apprentices rushed past, carrying bundles of cloth-wrapped glass, while senior members huddled around an iron-reinforced door, the source of the eerie fumes.

Guildmaster Alvaric stood in the center of the chaos, arms crossed, his expression unreadable.

Hargin grunted. “Ye called, I came. What in the hells is happenin’?”

Alvaric turned, giving a curt nod. “Hargin. Good. You’re here.” He gestured toward the vault door. “We have a situation.”

Hargin raised an eyebrow. “Aye, I guessed as much, what with the ominous green mist an’ the look o’ panic in everyone’s faces.”

Alvaric exhaled. “Several of our experimental potions have begun destabilizing. We don’t know why yet, but the reaction is accelerating. If left unchecked...” He trailed off, then gestured vaguely at the stone walls. “Let’s just say there won’t be much of a Guildhall left.”

Hargin frowned. “So what’s the plan?”

Alvaric met his gaze. “We need to transport them to a secured laboratory outside the city—a place built for handling... volatile mistakes.”

Hargin scratched his beard. “Ye want me to haul unstable explosives through the streets o’ Mazruth-Kul?”

Alvaric nodded. “Yes.”

Hargin sighed. “Aye. Thought as much.”

Hargin followed a group of alchemists into the vault. The air was thick with an unnatural heat, and the metal racks lining the walls shimmered strangely, as though reality itself was bending around the potions.

The potions in question were contained within six iron-bound glass canisters, each faintly glowing—one a deep blue, another a pulsing red, and one swirling with golden flecks that occasionally sparked like embers.

Master Gundrik, the burly dwarven alchemist, handed Hargin a pair of thick leather gloves. “Careful with these,” he rumbled. “If one of ‘em so much as gets jostled too hard, we’ll be breathin’ through holes in our chests.”

Hargin muttered, “Comfortin’ thought.” He carefully lifted the first canister, securing it into a reinforced wooden crate lined with straw and shock-absorbing moss.

“Where’s this lab I’m takin’ ‘em to?” Hargin asked.

Alvaric pulled out a sealed letter and handed it over. “A private facility two miles outside the South Gate. An alchemist named Varro Seft will be waiting for you.”

Hargin grunted. “Right. So all I gotta do is carry a box o’ magical bombs through the city, down the highway, an’ out past the gates. What could go wrong?”

Alvaric sighed. “That, my friend, is what worries me.”

Hargin loaded the crate onto a handcart, carefully wrapping the sides with thick tarpaulin to disguise its contents. As much as he wanted a horse-drawn wagon, a big covered cart would draw attention—and the last thing he needed was city guards sniffin’ around.

Snobbit met him at the entrance. “Ye do realize this looks real suspicious, aye?”

Hargin rolled his eyes. “Aye, an’ I’d rather folk be suspicious than evaporated.”

They moved cautiously through the winding streets, avoiding crowded areas, keeping their heads down. Everything seemed to be going smoothly—until they reached Copper Alley.

That’s when the first problem hit.

A sudden jolt from the uneven cobblestones sent the cart rocking sharply—and a muffled crack came from inside the crate.

Hargin’s blood ran cold.

“Shite,” he muttered, throwing back the tarp.

One of the canisters—the golden one, the one that sparked—had a hairline fracture running along its glass surface.

Snobbit leaned in, eyes widening. “Uh. That’s bad, yeah?”

The air around the crack rippled, and suddenly, the street itself distorted—colors shifting, shadows lengthening.

A nearby vendor’s fruit stand flickered and reappeared five feet to the left.

Snobbit’s jaw dropped. “Hargin, the potion’s makin’ reality drunk.”

Hargin gritted his teeth, pulling out a strip of sealing wax and alchemical resin. “Aye, an’ if I don’t patch this now, we’ll be pickin’ our teeth outta a different timeline.”

Working fast, he spread the resin over the crack, pressing a heated sealing wax over it to reinforce the repair. The potion’s glow flickered, then stabilized.

Snobbit let out a slow breath. “Right. No more bumps.”

Hargin wiped his forehead. “Aye. Let’s just—”

A low whistle cut through the air.

Snobbit froze. “Oh, bollocks.”

Hargin turned—only to see three figures in hooded cloaks, stepping out from an alley, hands resting on curved knives.

Smugglers.

Their leader, a thin-faced man with gold-plated teeth, smiled. “Well now. What’ve we got here?”

Hargin set his jaw. “A private errand. Keep walkin’.”

The smuggler tutted. “Now, now. No need for threats. Just seems to me like a fella carryin’ a well-secured box through the city might be worth havin’ a chat with.”

Snobbit sighed, cracking her knuckles. “Always with the interruptions.”

The smuggler smiled. “Now, how about ye be real polite-like and let us see what’s in the cart?”

Hargin exhaled slowly, glancing at Snobbit.

Then he muttered, “Lass... ye feel like stretchin’ yer legs?”

Snobbit grinned. “Aye. Been sittin’ too long.”

And just like that, she threw her dagger.

The fight was short, brutal, and loud. The smugglers weren't amateurs, but they weren't ready for a brawlin' dwarf with a hammer and a thief who moved like a shadow.

By the time the last one hit the ground, groaning and clutching his gut, Hargin was already grabbing the cart's handles.

"We need to move," he muttered.

Snobbit wiped her blade clean. "Aye. That was too loud. City Watch'll be sniffin' about soon."

As if on cue, a distant roll of thunder sounded overhead. The first fat drops of rain began to fall, slicking the cobblestones.

Hargin cursed. "Storm's comin'. We can't take the main road now. We're goin' through the Lower Warrens."

Snobbit groaned. "Fantastic. Smugglers, explodin' potions, an' now we're takin' a shortcut through the worst part o' town. What could possibly go wrong?"

Hargin tightened his grip on the cart.

"Let's find out."

The storm rolled in fast and heavy, the wind howling through the narrow streets as cold rain lashed the rooftops. Thunder rumbled overhead, and the slick cobblestones gleamed under flickering lanterns.

Hargin pushed the handcart forward, his muscles aching with effort, the weight of the unstable potions making every jolt a potential catastrophe. Snobbit moved ahead, keeping an eye on the dark alleys and looming doorways of the Lower Warrens—Mazruth-Kul's most notorious slum.

The place stank of mold and sewage, the air thick with the smell of wet timber, spoiled food, and the unmistakable tang of unwashed bodies. Figures huddled under rags in doorways, stray dogs picked through discarded refuse, and gutter-rats scurried through the drainage channels carved into the streets.

"Remind me why we're takin' this route again?" Snobbit muttered, keeping her hood low as she slipped around a puddle.

Hargin grunted, pushing the cart over a particularly rough patch of cobbles. "Because if we go the main way, we'll be stopped by the guards askin' why we're haulin' a cart full o' glowin' potions that smell like dragon piss."

Snobbit sighed. "Fair enough."

They moved carefully, avoiding curious eyes and prying hands. But trouble in the Lower Warrens was never far behind.

As they passed an abandoned bakery, a group of rough-looking men stepped out from a side alley—four of them, all armed with short blades and cudgels.

Hargin stopped the cart.

Snobbit sighed. “Every. Bloody. Time.”

The leader of the group, a scar-faced half-orc, grinned through yellowed teeth. “Now, now. What’s all this, then?”

Hargin rolled his shoulders, his hammer dangling from his belt. “Just passin’ through.”

The half-orc nodded toward the tarp-covered cart. “Looks heavy. Valuable, maybe?” His companions chuckled, stepping forward, blocking the street.

Snobbit tilted her head. “Ye think robbin’ folk in the rain is a good idea? Ye’ll just end up wet an’ stabbed.”

The half-orc snorted, drawing a knife. “Ye must be new here. See, we own this part of the Warrens. An’ if yer cart’s passin’ through, ye gotta pay the toll.”

Hargin exhaled slowly, keeping his hands loose. “Aye? An’ what’s the toll?”

The half-orc grinned, eyes gleaming. “Everything.”

The silence stretched for a moment.

Then Snobbit laughed.

The thugs hesitated. “Something funny, runt?”

Snobbit wiped her eye. “Aye. Just thinkin’ how much yer corpse is gonna stink when the city guard finds it tomorrow.”

The half-orc snarled, stepping forward—

CRACK!

Before he could react, Hargin swung the handcart forward, slamming the wooden frame into the nearest thug, sending the bastard sprawling into the mud.

The fight exploded into motion.

Snobbit ducked a wild swing, darting low and gutting her attacker with a quick flick of her dagger. Hargin drew his hammer, catching another brute across the ribs, sending him crashing into the wall.

The half-orc lunged for the cart, his blade slicing at the tarp—but Snobbit leapt onto his back, locking her arms around his throat.

“Ah, ah,” she whispered into his ear. “Don’t touch the cart, luv.”

The half-orc stumbled backward, gasping for air—just as Hargin drove his fist into his gut, doubling him over.

Snobbit dropped down, kicked him in the knee, and sent him face-first into the mud.

The last thug saw what had happened and turned to run.

Hargin hurled his hammer.

It cracked against the back of the man’s skull, sending him crumpling into a heap.

Silence returned, save for the sound of rain drumming against the rooftops.

Snobbit tossed her dagger in the air and caught it. “That was fun.”

Hargin shook rain from his beard, retrieving his hammer. “Aye, but we ain’t done yet.”

They pushed forward, leaving the bodies behind.

The storm worsened, the wind howling as the path finally led them to the old alchemical outpost outside the city walls.

The building was a squat, stone laboratory, smoke billowing from a tall chimney, the windows reinforced with iron bars.

Hargin banged his fist on the heavy wooden door.

A slot slid open, revealing a pair of sharp blue eyes.

“Who seeks entrance?” a voice called.

“Hargin Ironheart, from the Guild!” he bellowed. “Got yer volatile potions, an’ they ain’t gettin’ any more stable!”

A pause. Then, with a heavy clunk, the door unlatched and swung open.

A thin, wiry man with graying hair and ink-stained fingers stood before them—Varro Seft, the reclusive alchemist. He wrinkled his nose.

“You smell like a sewer.”

Snobbit grinned. “Aye, an’ we’d love a bath. But first, take yer bloody potions before they blow us all to hell.”

Varro waved them in.

The moment they stepped inside, Hargin let out a long breath, shaking the water from his coat.

They had made it. Barely.

Varro peered into the cart, then muttered, “By the gods... what in the hells did you people make?”

Hargin wiped rain from his brow. “A mistake, I reckon. Now, where do ye want ‘em?”

Varro motioned toward a reinforced vault at the back of the lab. “In there. Carefully.”

Hargin and Snobbit lifted the crate—their muscles screaming in protest—and set it down inside the containment chamber.

The door slammed shut, multiple locks clicking into place.

Varro exhaled. “Well. That’s one catastrophe avoided.”

Snobbit flopped into a nearby chair, stretching. “Hells, I need a drink.”

Hargin rubbed his temples. “Aye. An’ I need a week’s sleep.”

Varro chuckled dryly. “You’ll be lucky to get either. Alvaric will want a full report.”

Hargin sighed. “Aye, of course he will.”

Snobbit raised a finger. “Question—how much do we get paid for nearly dyin’ twice?”

Varro smiled. “That depends. Did you keep all the potions intact?”

Hargin grinned tiredly. “Close enough.”

Varro chuckled. “Then I’d say you earned a fine reward.”

Snobbit beamed. “Now that’s what I like to hear.”

Hargin and Snobbit stepped back into the Alchemist’s Guildhall, their clothes still damp from the storm, their muscles aching from the night’s troubles. The moment they crossed the threshold, Guildmaster Alvaric greeted them with his usual stoic expression, though Hargin swore he caught the briefest glint of approval in the old man’s eyes.

"You survived," Alvaric noted dryly.

Hargin grunted, rolling his shoulder. “Aye, an’ so did yer damned potions. That’s what matters.”

Alvaric gave a slow nod, reaching into his desk drawer. "Your payment, as agreed—350 gold pieces." He placed a heavy pouch onto the table, the satisfying clink of coins filling the room.

Snobbit snatched it up before Hargin could, weighing it in her palm. “Oh, aye. That’s the sound of a hard-earned drink.”

Hargin chuckled, rubbing his beard. “Aye, but I reckon ye ain’t callin’ us here just to pay us.”

Alvaric smiled faintly. “You assume correctly.”

He turned, retrieving a rolled-up parchment from a shelf and setting it before them. “The Guild has a new task for you. A rare ingredient hunt.”

Hargin exhaled slowly. “Oh, lovely. An’ what’re we fetchin’?”

Alvaric’s gaze hardened slightly. “Nightroot Bloom.”

Hargin’s brows lifted. “Ye’re jokin’.”

Alvaric’s expression said otherwise.

Snobbit tilted her head. “What’s Nightroot Bloom?”

Hargin crossed his arms. “A mushroom. Grows underground in the deepest, darkest places ye can imagine. Real temperamental, too—rots within hours if ye don’t keep it preserved right. But more importantly... the places where it grows?”

Alvaric finished for him. “The old catacombs beneath the city.”

Snobbit groaned. “So we’re goin’ grave-divin’?”

Alvaric nodded. “The bloom is a key reagent in a powerful restorative elixir the Guild is developing. We require fresh samples—several of them.”

Hargin sighed. “An’ let me guess... we ain’t the only ones sniffin’ after it.”

Alvaric’s expression darkened. “Correct. A rival alchemist, Varnius the Pale, seeks it as well. He is... less than ethical in his methods.”

Snobbit leaned on the table. “That mean he’ll try to screw us over?”

Alvaric’s lips thinned. “Without hesitation.”

Snobbit smiled. “Oh, I like ‘im already.”

Alvaric ignored her. “Furthermore, the catacombs are not unguarded.”

Hargin snorted. “Aye, ‘cause it wouldn’t be interestin’ otherwise.”

Alvaric gestured to a detailed city map, tapping a secluded entranceway near the old quarter of Mazruth-Kul.

“There is an old access point beneath the ruins of Saint Malagar’s Chapel. Few venture there anymore—too many tales of restless dead.”

Hargin took a long breath, glancing at Snobbit. “Aye. That tracks.”

Snobbit sighed, stretching her arms. “So we go into the spooky tunnels, pick some mushrooms, dodge a backstabbin’ rival, an’ don’t get eaten by ghosts. Easy.”

Alvaric gave a grim smile. “There’s one more thing.”

Snobbit raised a brow. “Course there is.”

Alvaric unrolled another parchment—this one depicting a shifting, gelatinous creature, its semi-transparent form riddled with bones and half-dissolved weapons.

“The catacombs are home to an... unusual entity. An alchemical ooze.”

Hargin groaned. “Oh, come on.”

Alvaric’s tone remained calm, measured. “It is highly territorial. Avoid direct combat if possible—fire and strong acids are the only things that can harm it.”

Hargin pinched the bridge of his nose. “So. Avoid the undead, dodge an alchemical backstabber, harvest a mushroom that rots on sight, an’ don’t get eaten by a puddle of death.”

Alvaric nodded. “Precisely.”

Hargin sighed. “Aye, alright. Let’s go mushroom pickin’.”

Snobbit grinned. “I’ll bring the shovel.”

The entrance to Saint Malagar’s Chapel was exactly what Hargin expected—old, crumbling, and reeking of bad omens. The once-proud stone building was nothing more than a husk of blackened ruins, its roof collapsed, walls cracked, and a massive iron gate leading below—half-buried beneath centuries of grime and overgrowth.

Snobbit kicked a loose rock, watching it tumble down the ancient stone steps leading into the dark abyss. “Ye know,” she muttered, “I can think of about ten better ways to spend an evenin’.”

Hargin adjusted the leather straps of his satchel, where he had packed alchemical fire, preservative salts, and his trusty hammer. “Aye. An’ nine of ‘em involve drinkin’.”

Snobbit snickered, then flicked open her flintbox, lighting a small lantern. “Last chance to back out, old man.”

Hargin snorted, stepping past her and descending the first steps into the catacombs. “Aye, an’ let the bloody Guild say I ran from a mushroom hunt? Not in this life.”

Snobbit rolled her eyes and followed.

The stone walls narrowed as they moved deeper, the air growing colder, damper—until the city above felt like a world away. The smell of stale air, rotting wood, and something far older clung to the tunnels, thick as a fog.

“Lovely place,” Snobbit muttered. “Real welcomin’.”

Hargin glanced at the faded carvings along the walls—ancient names, long forgotten. “Aye,” he muttered. “Just hope we don’t wake the neighbors.”

The map from the Alchemist’s Guild showed the general location of the Nightroot Bloom—deep in the lower tunnels, where moisture and decay thrived. The problem?

The path was littered with bones.

Hargin stopped, his boots crunching softly on the fragmented remains of the long-dead. “Well. That’s ominous.”

Snobbit crouched, tapping one of the skulls with her dagger. “Aye. Freshly picked clean, too.”

Hargin frowned, adjusting his grip on his hammer. “Ain’t rats doin’ this.”

As if on cue, a low, shuffling noise echoed from a tunnel ahead.

Snobbit froze, ears twitching. “Ye hear that?”

Hargin gritted his teeth, turning toward the darkened corridor. “Aye. We got company.”

From the shadows, figures began to emerge—not fast, not living, but moving nonetheless.

Skeletal remains wrapped in decayed cloth, their eye sockets hollow, their fingers clutching rusted weapons.

The dead walked.

Snobbit sighed, twirling her dagger. “Right. Guess we’re doin’ this.”

Hargin cracked his neck, hefting his hammer. “Aye. Let’s put ‘em back to sleep.”

The first skeleton lunged, rusty blade flashing.

Hargin met it with a swing of his hammer, shattering its ribcage, sending bones clattering across the floor.

Another lunged at Snobbit, its broken spear jabbing wildly. She ducked, rolling under its strike, then slashed upward, her dagger splitting its vertebrae clean in half.

More of them came—six, maybe seven, moving with unnatural purpose.

Hargin planted his feet, swinging wide, crushing a skull with one brutal strike. “How many o’ these bastards ye reckon there are?”

Snobbit sidestepped a grasping claw, flipping over a stone altar to land behind another foe. “Dunno. Don’t care. Just keep swingin’!”

Another undead horror lunged from the side—this one larger, a rotting corpse still clinging to ancient chainmail.

It snarled, lifting a two-handed axe, swinging down with deadly force.

Hargin barely dodged, the axe carving deep into the stone where he had stood.

“Oh, yer a big bastard,” Hargin muttered, gripping his hammer tight.

The thing lunged again—but Snobbit, quick as a viper, darted behind it, driving her dagger into the base of its skull.

The undead jerked, then collapsed into a pile of unmoving bones.

The last two skeletons hesitated.

Hargin grinned. “That’s right. Run.”

They didn’t. Instead, they collapsed into the dust, whatever magic had bound them fading into nothing.

Snobbit exhaled, wiping her blade. “Well. That was invigoratin’.”

Hargin grunted, rolling his shoulder. “Aye. But we ain’t done yet.”

As they pressed deeper, the air changed. The scent of moist earth and decay thickened, and in the distance, the faintest glow of bioluminescent fungi flickered along the walls.

They were close.

Then—footsteps.

Not theirs.

Hargin and Snobbit froze, instinctively pressing against the stone wall, listening.

A figure stepped into view, illuminated by the faint fungal glow.

Tall, dressed in dark robes, with pale, hollow features and a cold smile—Varnius the Pale.

Behind him, two mercenaries, each gripping curved sabers.

“Well, well,” Varnius said, his voice like silk over steel. “Fancy meeting you here.”

Hargin gritted his teeth. “Varnius.”

Varnius gestured lazily. “I assume you’re after the Nightroot Bloom. A shame. I’m afraid I require it as well.”

Snobbit smiled, resting a hand on her dagger. “Right. So we’re doin’ this the hard way, then?”

Varnius chuckled. “Oh, my dear, I was hoping you’d say that.”

His hand flicked out—hurling a glass vial that shattered against the floor, releasing a thick green mist that began to swirl toward Hargin and Snobbit.

Hargin cursed, gripping his hammer.

Things had just gotten a whole lot more complicated.

The thick green mist spread fast, creeping along the catacomb floor like a hungry fog, its acrid scent burning Hargin’s nose.

“Poison gas!” he barked, yanking his scarf up over his mouth.

Snobbit leapt backward, cursing. “Oh, bloody hell—should’ve guessed ye were the type to fight dirty!”

Varnius chuckled, stepping further into the gloom. “Fighting? My dear, I’m merely… securing an advantage.”

His two mercenaries advanced, swords glinting in the eerie fungal glow.

Hargin shifted his grip on his hammer. “Aye? Let’s see how long ye keep it.”

He swung low and fast, smashing the handle of one merc’s sword, sending it clattering into the mist. The man staggered back, swearing.

The second mercenary lunged at Snobbit.

Snobbit twisted, the blade slicing past her cloak, then drove her dagger into the man’s thigh. He howled, stumbling, and she kicked him square in the chest, sending him toppling into a rotting stone coffin.

The mercs weren’t the real problem—the damned gas was.

Already, the edges of Hargin’s vision blurred slightly. His breath felt heavier.

Snobbit gasped. “This shite’s workin’ fast.”

Varnius smiled. “Ah, yes. Choking Spores of the Serpent Lotus. Slows the body, dulls the mind. Soon, your limbs will feel like lead, and you’ll—”

Hargin didn’t let him finish.

With a grunt, he yanked a vial from his belt—Alchemical Fire—and hurled it into the mist.

WHOOSH!

Flames exploded, consuming the toxic gas in a roaring blast, lighting up the tunnel in a burst of blue and green flame.

Varnius staggered backward, shielding his face as the heat scorched the air around him.

Snobbit, coughing, grinned. “Oh, aye. That’s one way to clear a room.”

Hargin, breathing hard, leveled his hammer at Varnius. “Still feel like runnin’ yer mouth?”

Varnius hissed, eyes burning with hatred. “Tch. Another time.”

With a flick of his wrist, he hurled a second vial at the ground—a blinding burst of alchemical light erupted, forcing Hargin and Snobbit to shield their eyes.

By the time the spots faded, Varnius and his wounded mercs were gone.

Snobbit wiped her mouth, still tasting the acrid burn of the gas. “That bastard’s gonna be a problem, ain’t he?”

Hargin grunted, adjusting his satchel. “Aye. But fer now—let’s get the damned mushrooms.”

Pushing deeper into the catacombs, they finally reached a damp, cavernous chamber, the air humid and thick with decay.

Bioluminescent fungi lined the walls, pulsing with a faint green glow, their eerie light revealing clusters of dark purple mushrooms growing from the roots of an ancient, collapsed crypt.

Hargin grinned. “There ye are, ye tricky bastards.”

He moved forward, kneeling at the base of the roots, retrieving his silver-plated harvesting knife—the only thing that could properly cut the stems without spoiling them.

“Right,” he muttered, working carefully. “Gotta cut at the base, avoid the caps touchin’ open air—rots in minutes if ye ain’t careful.”

Snobbit crouched beside him, watching. “Ye sure do know a lot about fungus.”

Hargin snorted, sliding the first perfectly cut bloom into a preservation pouch. “Aye, well, when ye spend half yer life in the mountains, ye learn what’s edible, useful, or likely to kill ye.”

Snobbit smiled. “This one’s all three, then?”

Hargin chuckled, cutting another. “Aye. Somethin’ like that.”

Just as he reached for a third—

The ground trembled.

Snobbit froze. "...That wasn't me."

A deep, wet gurgling sound echoed through the chamber.

Hargin's grip tightened on his hammer. "Oh, shite."

From the far end of the cavern, a massive gelatinous form oozed out from a collapsed tunnel—a semi-transparent blob of shifting, alchemical sludge, riddled with dissolved bones and rusted bits of armor.

It lurched forward, pulsing with a sickly greenish-yellow glow.

Snobbit stared. "Is that—"

"Aye," Hargin muttered. "That's an alchemical ooze."

The creature shuddered, sensing movement, and then—it surged toward them.

Hargin grabbed Snobbit's cloak and yanked her back just as a whip-like tendril of acidic slime lashed toward them, melting through stone where she had been crouched.

"YE BLOODY PILE O' WASTE!" Hargin roared, hauling his hammer up. "RUN!"

Snobbit didn't argue. "Right. Leavin'!"

They bolted toward the opposite tunnel, Hargin shoving the Nightroot pouch into his satchel as the ooze slithered after them, pulsing hungrily.

"We fightin' it or leggin' it?!" Snobbit shouted, dodging another acidic tendril.

Hargin gritted his teeth, scanning the chamber. "Ooze like this? Fire or acids'll kill it. But we got neither in enough supply."

Snobbit cursed. "Right. So leggin' it."

The chamber trembled again, stones dislodging from the ceiling as the beast's movements shook the crypt.

Then—Hargin got an idea.

He grabbed Snobbit's arm, dragging her toward a weakened stone pillar near the exit.

"Help me topple this!"

Snobbit didn't hesitate. The two of them pushed, straining against the waterlogged support beam.

The ooze surged toward them, its form swelling—

And then—

CRACK!

The pillar gave way, collapsing in a deafening crash, bringing half the ancient ceiling down onto the beast.

The ooze let out a gurgling shriek, crushed beneath tons of rock and rubble.

Dust filled the cavern.

Silence followed.

Snobbit, panting, coughed through the settling dirt. "...Hells, I hope that thing stays dead."

Hargin wiped sweat from his brow. "If it ain't, it's at least trapped for a long while."

They sat there for a moment, catching their breath, before Snobbit broke into a wide grin.

"Well, then. That's one way to harvest mushrooms."

Hargin chuckled, shaking his head. "Aye, lass. That it is."

He pulled open his satchel, checking the intact Nightroot Blooms, and exhaled in relief.

"Right," he muttered, standing. "Let's get outta here before we find somethin' worse."

Snobbit dusted herself off. "Aye. An' next time, I'm pickin' the job."

They made their way back toward the surface, the weight of the Nightroot Bloom secure in Hargin's bag—along with the lingering promise of future trouble.

Hargin and Snobbit stepped into the Alchemist's Guildhall, weary but victorious. Their clothes were stained with dirt, their boots tracked catacomb dust, and Snobbit still had a smudge of ooze residue on her sleeve that she hadn't bothered to wipe off.

Guildmaster Alvaric was waiting for them at his desk, an expression of mild surprise on his face. "You're back. And in one piece, I see."

Hargin dropped his satchel onto the table, unfastening the leather straps and pulling out a carefully wrapped bundle. "Aye, barely. Here's yer bloody Nightroot Blooms."

Alvaric took the package, inspecting the mushrooms inside. He gave a satisfied nod. "Fresh. Properly harvested. You did well." He gestured to a heavy pouch on the desk.

"Your payment. Five hundred gold."

Snobbit grabbed the pouch before Hargin could, weighing it with a grin. "Now that's a number I like."

Hargin rolled his eyes. "Aye, great. Now, what's next?"

Alvaric's expression darkened.

"We have a problem."

Alvaric pulled out a sealed letter, breaking the wax and unfolding the parchment. He adjusted his spectacles, reading over it.

"Last night, one of our research vaults was broken into. A key formula—an advanced potion of regeneration—was stolen."

Hargin frowned. "An' who had access to it?"

Alvaric's gaze hardened. "A former member of the Guild. Zorvani Voss."

Snobbit tilted her head. "The tiefling alchemist? The one with the shady connections?"

Alvaric nodded. "The very same. He was expelled from the Guild two years ago for... questionable dealings. We believed he had disappeared, but it seems he still holds a grudge."

Hargin leaned against the desk, arms crossed. "What's he plannin' to do with it?"

Alvaric exhaled slowly. "Sell it. The formula is far too valuable to keep for himself—he's likely taking it to the Undermarket."

Snobbit let out a low whistle. "Hells. That's bad."

Hargin grunted. "Aye. If that formula gets into the wrong hands, every warlord an' crime lord'll be fightin' over it."

Alvaric placed a handwritten note on the table. "We need you to retrieve it. Discreetly."

Hargin tapped the paper. "An' where do we start?"

Alvaric's eyes glinted coldly. "With his contacts."

The Undermarket of Mazruth-Kul was no place for the faint of heart. Hidden beneath the city, accessible only through back-alley tunnels and forgotten sewer paths, it was a haven for smugglers, slavers, and black-market dealers.

Hargin and Snobbit moved carefully through the crowded underground bazaar, where hooded figures whispered deals, thieves haggled over stolen goods, and mercenaries loitered, waiting for work.

Snobbit adjusted her hood, glancing around. "Right. So who're we lookin' for?"

Hargin scanned the stalls, eyes landing on a familiar face—a thin, rat-faced man with a twitchy demeanor, hunched over a table of alchemical reagents.

"Targin the Broker."

Snobbit grinned. “Oh, I like him already.”

They approached, and Targin looked up, eyes narrowing as he recognized Hargin.

“Ah. Master Ironheart. What a... surprise.”

Hargin leaned on the table. “Lookin’ fer a name, Targin.”

The broker licked his lips, shifting uncomfortably. “A name costs coin.”

Snobbit leaned in, twirling her dagger. “Aye. Or ye could just be real friendly an’ keep all yer teeth.”

Targin swallowed. “Alright, alright. No need to be uncivil.” He glanced around, lowering his voice. “Word is, Zorvani’s hiding out in the Silkveil Ward, using an old apothecary as his base. He’s got hired muscle—five men, maybe six. And he’s planning to make the sale tonight.”

Hargin nodded once. “Good lad.” He dropped three gold pieces on the table. “That’s fer yer troubles.”

Targin exhaled in relief. “Pleasure doin’ business.”

As Hargin turned away, Snobbit smiled at Targin. “Ye got lucky, ratman.”

Targin just nodded nervously.

The Silkveil Ward was home to old, forgotten buildings, once thriving shops, now half-abandoned ruins occupied by criminals and outcasts.

Hargin and Snobbit crouched behind a stack of broken crates, staring at the apothecary’s entrance.

Two guards stood outside, hands resting on curved swords, eyes scanning the street. Inside, candlelight flickered through the cracked windows.

Snobbit whispered, “What’s the play?”

Hargin grinned, pulling out a vial of sleeping powder. “We go in quiet.”

The first guard never saw it coming.

Snobbit moved like a shadow, clamping a hand over his mouth and driving her dagger into his side. She lowered his silent, twitching body to the ground.

The second guard turned, but before he could react, Hargin hurled the sleeping powder into his face. He staggered back, coughing, then collapsed like a sack of bricks.

Snobbit grinned. “Ye’re gettin’ sneaky, old man.”

Hargin chuckled. “Aye. Now let’s find Zorvani.”

Inside, the shop was a mess of old alchemical equipment, broken shelves, and the lingering scent of burnt reagents.

From the back room, voices carried.

Zorvani’s smooth, arrogant voice. “The formula is priceless. If you want it, the price is ten thousand gold.”

A second voice, deeper, colder. “And if I just kill you and take it?”

Hargin’s stomach tightened.

Someone else was after the formula.

Snobbit whispered, “So much fer a quiet job.”

Hargin gritted his teeth, gripping his hammer. “Aye. Let’s move.”

They slipped forward, the sound of the negotiation turning tense, hostile.

Then—a shout. A scuffle. A blade being drawn.

Hargin kicked the door open.

Inside, Zorvani stood cornered, a parchment clutched in his hand, while a hooded figure loomed over him, a dagger pressed against his throat.

The stranger turned—his eyes gleaming like black glass.

A third party had entered the game.

Snobbit cursed. “Oh, hells.”

Hargin raised his hammer. “Right then. Let’s settle this.”

The backroom of the apothecary was a cramped, dimly lit space, the air thick with the scent of burnt herbs and spilled chemicals. Shelves lined the walls, stacked with half-finished potions and scraps of parchment, but Hargin’s attention was locked on the scene before him

Zorvani Voss, the traitorous tiefling alchemist, stood backed against a table, a crumpled formula clutched in his trembling hands. His golden eyes darted wildly, his violet skin pale with panic.

Standing over him was someone far worse.

The hooded stranger’s blade gleamed under the flickering lamplight, pressed just under Zorvani’s jaw.

And his eyes—deep, bottomless black—held no trace of humanity.

Hargin tightened his grip on his warhammer, stepping forward. “Right, then. Who in the hells are ye?”

The stranger tilted his head, as if amused. His voice was smooth, emotionless. “I am here for the formula. Same as you.”

Snobbit snorted, already palming a throwing knife. “Aye? Well, ye got one problem.”

The stranger didn’t react. “And what is that?”

Snobbit grinned. “Us.”

Without hesitation, she whipped her dagger at him.

The stranger moved unnaturally fast, twisting aside just as the blade sliced past his hood, embedding into the wall behind him.

Hargin lunged, swinging his hammer in a brutal arc.

The stranger ducked, but not fast enough—the impact caught him across the ribs, sending him crashing into a shelf of glass vials.

Zorvani took the opportunity to bolt—his boots skidding on the floor as he dashed toward the door.

Snobbit cursed. “Hargin, the bastard’s runnin’!”

Hargin made a split-second choice.

Did he go after Zorvani?

Or deal with this unnatural assassin first?

He growled, swinging again, choosing to finish what he started.

The hooded man recovered fast, drawing two thin, curved blades—his movements almost too fluid, too perfect.

“Interesting,” the man murmured, lunging forward.

Hargin blocked the first strike, the metal screeching as the assassin’s blade scraped against his hammer’s shaft.

The second blade came fast—Hargin barely twisted aside, feeling the cold steel slice through his sleeve, leaving a thin burning line across his arm.

The bastard was fast. Too fast.

Snobbit moved in low, flipping over the table to land behind the assassin, stabbing toward his spine.

He whirled, parrying her dagger with inhuman precision, knocking her off balance.

Snobbit snarled. “Oh, ye’re gonna be a pain in my arse, ain’t ye?”

Hargin used the distraction—he dropped low, swung hard, and hooked the assassin’s ankle with the haft of his hammer.

The assassin stumbled—just enough.

Snobbit lunged, planting her foot on a broken chair, flipping over the assassin’s head—and, as she landed, she brought her dagger down into his shoulder.

He hissed, staggering.

Hargin didn’t let up.

He roared, lifting his hammer high, and brought it crashing down.

The assassin barely twisted away, the hammer slamming into the wooden floor, splintering it.

But before Hargin could swing again, the assassin dropped something small and glassy.

A smoke bomb.

The room exploded in thick black fog, choking and blinding them.

By the time the smoke cleared—

The assassin was gone.

Snobbit coughed. “Oh, that slippery bastard.”

Hargin growled, scanning the room. But their attacker had vanished.

And worse—

Zorvani was nowhere to be seen.

“Shite,” Hargin muttered.

Snobbit sheathed her dagger. “Right. We need to move.”

They hit the streets fast, following fresh boot prints in the muddy alleyways.

Zorvani had a head start, but Hargin knew these streets better.

They raced through the Undermarket, dodging smugglers, beggars, and thieves, shoving past drunken mercenaries and suspicious traders.

Then—

“There!” Snobbit pointed.

Zorvani was running down a side alley, shoving aside a fish vendor’s stall, knocking over crates in his panic.

“Bloody bastard!” Hargin sped up, barreling through the obstacles.

Zorvani turned a sharp corner, heading toward a rope bridge spanning an underground canal.

Hargin and Snobbit closed in.

Then—Zorvani stumbled.

His foot caught on a loose board, and he crashed down hard, sending the stolen formula skidding across the damp cobblestones.

He scrambled for it, but Hargin was already there.

He stomped down on the parchment, gripping his hammer tight.

Zorvani froze, panting, staring up at him.

Snobbit arrived a second later, flipping a dagger between her fingers.

“Well,” she mused, “this is awkward.”

Hargin glared down at the pathetic, wheezing tiefling.

“Ye sold out the Guild, Zorvani.”

Zorvani licked his lips, holding up his hands. “Hargin—mate—listen. It wasn’t personal. It’s just business.”

Snobbit snorted. “That’s what all dead men say.”

Zorvani scooted back slightly. “Look, ye got the formula, aye? Just let me go. We can pretend this never happened—”

Hargin’s grip tightened on his hammer.

Here it was.

Zorvani’s golden eyes darted between Hargin and Snobbit, his sharp tiefling features twisted with desperation. “Look,” he wheezed, still sprawled on the muddy cobblestones, “ye got what ye came for. The formula’s yours. Just let me walk away, aye?”

Snobbit twirled her dagger idly, smiling. “Oh, aye. We’re lettin’ ye walk, alright.” She nudged Hargin with her elbow. “We takin’ ‘im back in chains or just knockin’ ‘im out?”

Zorvani paled, his tail flicking nervously behind him. “Chains?! Oh, come on! Ye know what they’ll do to me if ye bring me back to the Guild!”

Hargin loomed over him, arms crossed. “Aye,” he said. “That’s the idea.”

Zorvani scrambled back, but before he could bolt, Snobbit lashed out with a sharp kick to his gut, knocking the wind from him. He doubled over, coughing.

Hargin sighed. “Ye could’ve made this easier, mate.” Then he reached into his belt pouch, pulled out a small vial of sleeping draught, and flicked the cork off with his thumb.

Before Zorvani could protest, Hargin grabbed the back of his head and poured the potion down his throat.

The tiefling spluttered, flailed weakly, and then his eyes rolled back. He went limp.

Snobbit stood up straight, brushing dust off her cloak. “Ye always keep knockout juice on ye?”

Hargin grunted, lifting Zorvani over his shoulder with a grunt. “Aye. Handy for pissheads who don’t know when to shut up.”

Snobbit smiled. “Aye, well. That’s most o’ the city.”

Together, they carried Zorvani’s unconscious form back through the winding alleys of the Undermarket, careful to avoid too much attention. The deeper they went, the quieter the world became, the hum of illicit trade giving way to distant whispers and the echo of footsteps.

By the time they reached the Alchemist’s Guild, dawn was creeping over Mazruth-Kul, casting a pale glow over the city’s rooftops.

Alvaric was waiting for them at the Guildhall’s entrance, his arms folded, his sharp gaze locked onto the limp form slung over Hargin’s shoulder.

“You succeeded.”

Hargin grunted, adjusting the weight. “Aye. An’ he’s still breathin’.”

Snobbit smiled. “For now.”

Alvaric didn’t smile. “Bring him inside.”

They stepped into the main hall, where a few senior guild members were already gathered—some watching with thinly veiled curiosity, others with cold satisfaction.

Alvaric motioned to two armored enforcers, who stepped forward and relieved Hargin of his burden, grabbing Zorvani by the arms and dragging him onto the stone floor. One of them slapped him awake.

Zorvani stirred, groaning, blinking up at the circle of cold faces.

Then he realized where he was.

And who was standing over him.

His tail lashed in panic as he tried to scramble backward. “No, no—wait! Listen! We can work somethin’ out!”

Alvaric crouched down, studying him like one might study a particularly disgusting insect.

“You betrayed the Guild,” he said, voice calm but cold. “You stole from us. Sold secrets to the highest bidder.”

Zorvani shook his head wildly. “Look, I was desperate! I didn’t have a choice—”

“You had a choice,” Alvaric interrupted. “You chose wrong.”

Zorvani gulped. “Please, Alvaric. I can be useful! I know things—things ye lot don’t!”

Alvaric sighed, standing up. “And yet, I find myself uninterested.”

He turned to the enforcers. “Take him below.”

Zorvani’s eyes widened in horror. “No—no, wait! WAIT! PLEASE, I—”

The enforcers dragged him from the chamber, his screams echoing off the stone walls.

Snobbit tilted her head. “Ye reckon they’ll kill ‘im?”

Alvaric didn’t turn to face them. “Death would be merciful.”

Hargin exhaled. He wasn’t sure he wanted to know what happened to traitors in the Guild’s dungeons.

Instead, he pulled the stolen formula from his coat, handing it over. “This is what ye wanted, aye?”

Alvaric took the parchment, carefully unrolling it. He studied the intricate, coded symbols, then gave a slow nod.

“This is it. The Guild is in your debt.” He folded the parchment and slipped it into his robes. “Your payment, as promised.”

Another heavy pouch was placed on the table.

Hargin picked it up, weighing it in his palm. “How much?”

“Six hundred gold.”

Snobbit let out a low whistle. “Now that’s a nice number.”

Alvaric finally turned to them. “You handled this well. There will be more work for you soon.”

Hargin smiled. “Aye. Figured as much.”

Snobbit stretched. “Good. ‘Cause I’m gettin’ used to expensive drinks.”

Alvaric nodded, then gestured to the door. “Go. Rest. Enjoy your earnings while you can.”

Hargin and Snobbit didn’t need to be told twice.

As they stepped out into the early morning streets, Snobbit yawned, tossing the coin pouch in the air and catching it.

“Well, Ironheart, another job well done.”

Hargin sighed, running a hand through his beard. “Aye. An’ now, I need a bloody drink.”

Snobbit grinned. “Then let’s go spend some o’ this gold on somethin’ that ain’t gonna try an’ kill us.”

Hargin chuckled. “Aye. For once.”

And with that, they disappeared into the winding streets of Mazruth-Kul, pockets heavier, but with the lingering knowledge that their work was far from over.

A few days had passed since Hargin and Snobbit delivered Zorvani Voss into the Guild’s hands. With gold in his pocket and a rare moment of peace, Hargin decided to take a walk through the city, stopping by familiar places to restock supplies and check on old acquaintances.

One such place was Borgan Cleaversong’s Butchery.

The strong scent of smoked meats and fresh cuts hit Hargin the moment he stepped inside. Saws scraped against bone, knives thumped against thick wooden chopping blocks, and the rich aroma of curing spices filled the air.

Behind the heavy stone counter, his arms thick as tree trunks, stood Borgan Cleaversong—a gruff, broad-shouldered dwarf, his thick brown beard streaked with lines of gray, his meaty hands stained red from a recent cut.

He looked up, squinting at Hargin. “Well, well, if it ain’t the beard-slingin’, potion-brewin’ troublemaker himself.”

Hargin grinned, stepping up to the counter. “Aye, an’ if it ain’t the meat-choppin’, blood-slingin’ butcher o’ Mazruth-Kul.”

Borgan let out a deep, rolling chuckle, setting down his cleaver. “What brings ye in, Ironheart? Ain’t got another feud with me sausages, have ye?”

Hargin snorted. “Nay, I’m just passin’ through. Thought I’d see if ye got any decent cuts o’ venison in today.”

Borgan nodded. “Aye, got some fresh ones from the hunters this mornin’. But before that—I been meanin’ to ask ye somethin’.”

Hargin raised a brow. “Oh? An’ what’s that?”

Borgan rubbed his beard, eyeing Hargin thoughtfully. “Ye’re an alchemist, aye? That means ye know all kinds o’ tricks fer breakin’ things down, mixin’ elements, preservin’ substances.”

Hargin folded his arms. “Aye. What of it?”

Borgan leaned in slightly. “Well, I been thinkin’. Meat’s no different, aye? Some cuts are tough as stone, others spoil faster than they should. Thought maybe ye’d have a trick or two fer makin’ better marinades.”

Hargin smiled. “So what ye’re askin’ is how to make yer meat taste better?”

Borgan grunted. “Oi, don’t make it sound like an insult.”

Hargin chuckled, then scratched his thick black beard, thinking. “Aye, I reckon I got a few ideas.”

Hargin reached into his satchel, pulling out a few vials of liquid extracts and powders, setting them on the counter.

“Right,” he began. “**First thing ye need—fer tough cuts like boar or old goat—is somethin’ that’ll break down the muscle fibers without ruinin’ the flavor.”

He tapped a small dark-green vial. “This here is Tenderroot Essence. Comes from a rare root that softens muscle tissue. Just a few drops in a marinade, an’ even an old bull’s steak’ll be as soft as a noble’s belly.”

Borgan huffed in approval. “Aye, that’d be useful.”

Hargin continued, picking up a pale amber liquid. “This one’s called Firefruit Vinegar. Adds a rich, smoky heat to meats, good for roastin’ an’ spiced sausages.”

Next, he gestured to a thick black oil. “Deepwood Brine. Good fer long preservation. Keeps meat fresh for weeks without it goin’ rancid.”

Borgan nodded eagerly. “An’ fer flavor?”

Hargin grinned. “Ah, now that’s where the real magic happens.”

He pulled out a small bottle of deep purple liquid. “This is Nightberry Reduction. Works wonders on game meats—venison, boar, even duck. Adds a rich, dark sweetness that deepens flavor without overpowerin’ it.”

Then, a small silver powder. “This is Starpetal Salt. Found only in the high mountains. Adds a crispness to fat, makin’ it more savory.”

Borgan’s eyes gleamed. “Hells, Ironheart, I oughta hire ye as me chief marinade-maker.”

Hargin chuckled. “Aye, well, I prefer brewin’ things that don’t bleed.”

Borgan stroked his beard, nodding to the vials. “I’ll take the lot. How much?”

Hargin thought for a moment. “Call it seventy-five gold for the batch.”

Borgan snorted. “I’ll give ye sixty.”

Hargin grinned. “Seventy.”

Borgan grumbled. “Sixty-five an’ I throw in a rack o’ lamb.”

Hargin sighed, then extended his hand. “Deal.”

Borgan grinned, slapping a massive hand into Hargin’s. “Aye. Now that’s business.”

As Borgan packed up the vials, he leaned against the counter, his gaze turning distant for a moment.

“Ye know,” he rumbled, “this shop weren’t always mine.”

Hargin, sipping from a flask of water, raised a brow. “Oh?”

Borgan nodded. “Been in me family fer six generations. Started with Rurik Cleaversong, me great-great-grandda. A butcher o’ legendary skill. Folk said he could carve a side o’ beef in under three minutes an’ never waste a scrap.”

Hargin chuckled. “Aye, that’s a skill.”

Borgan continued. “He built this shop from nothin’. Supplied meat to the finest inns in the city, even to the palace kitchens. Kings an’ lords ate our cuts, an’ to this day, every Cleaversong lad learns the trade.”

He sighed, scratching his chin. “Me father, Durnek Cleaversong, ran this place before me. Taught me everythin’ I know. How to tell good cuts from bad. How to use every part o’ the animal. He always said, ‘A butcher who wastes his meat deserves a dull blade.’”

Hargin nodded. “Sounds like a wise dwarf.”

Borgan smiled. “Aye. An’ a mean bastard when he wanted to be.”

The two dwarves chuckled, sharing a brief moment of understanding—both men of craft, tradition, and legacy.

After a moment, Borgan clapped a massive hand on Hargin’s shoulder. “Ye ever need good meat, ye come to me. Best in the city, no question.”

Hargin grinned. “Aye. An’ if ye ever need more alchemical tricks, ye know where to find me.”

Borgan chuckled. “Aye, Ironheart. I reckon I do.”

With that, Hargin slung his satchel over his shoulder, heading out into the streets of Mazruth-Kul, feeling the warmth of old friendships, old stories, and the ever-growing web of connections that bound the city’s people together.

Hargin slammed the heavy wooden door behind him, the comforting warmth of his home and shop immediately washing over him. The hearth crackled, filling the room with a rich, golden glow. The scent of burning oak, pipeweed, and dried herbs mixed in the air, making the place feel... right.

Across the room, Snobbit sat at the study table, legs propped up on a chair, flipping through an old tome with a half-drunk mug of Raging Weasel beside her. She barely looked up.

“Ye get robbed or did Borgan actually give ye a fair deal?”

Hargin snorted, tossing a wrapped package onto the counter. “Aye, he tried his usual tricks, but I walked away with a fine rack o’ lamb.”

Snobbit’s ears perked up. “Oh? Now ye’re speakin’ me language.”

Hargin rolled up his sleeves, heading to the kitchen corner, where a cast-iron pan and various herbs lined the shelves. He set the lamb on a wooden board, running a finger over the thick marbled fat before pulling out his alchemical vials.

“Right,” he muttered, reaching for a small bottle of Starpetal Salt. “Let’s make this proper.”

Snobbit watched as Hargin worked, rubbing a marinade of Deepwood Brine and Firefruit Vinegar over the lamb, adding a dusting of powdered juniper and crushed garlic cloves. As the pan heated, the fat sizzled, filling the room with rich, mouthwatering aromas.

At the edge of the table, Squeek, Hargin’s oversized rat companion, twitched his nose, his little black eyes locked onto the cooking meat.

Snobbit grinned. “Aye, I see ye, sneaky bastard.”

Squeek chittered, creeping closer.

Hargin let out a gruff chuckle, pulling a juicy, slightly charred piece off the bone and tossing it to the waiting rat. Squeek caught it mid-air, scurrying to a corner with his prize.

Snobbit grabbed a fork, eagerly stabbing into a piece as soon as Hargin set the food down. “Hells, Ironheart, ye missed yer callin’. Ye should’ve been a cook.”

Hargin took a slow sip of Raging Weasel, chewing thoughtfully. “Aye, maybe. But then who’d be mixin’ all them dangerous potions?”

Snobbit grinned, mouth full. “Fair point.”

Just as they were finishing their meal, a heavy knock sounded at the door.

Hargin grumbled, pushing his chair back. “Always when I’m eatin’.”

He opened the door to find a courier from the Guild, a young human lad with a crate stacked onto a small handcart.

“Delivery from the Alchemist’s Guild,” the lad said. “Master Alvaric’s orders.”

Hargin grunted, signing the receipt slip before hauling the crate inside.

He pried open the wooden lid, revealing a neatly packed selection of rare and exotic ingredients—each carefully labeled in fine script.

Snobbit leaned over the table, raising a brow. “That ain’t no usual order. What’s in it?”

Hargin scanned the parchment inside. “Guild wants me to brew up a set o’ specialized potions.”

He held up the list, scanning the required mixtures and reagents.

Snobbit whistled. “Oh, aye. That’s some high-grade stuff.”

Hargin nodded slowly, running a hand through his beard. “Aye. If they’re givin’ me dragon’s blood an’ phase spider silk, they ain’t just stockin’ shelves. Someone important needs these.”

Snobbit tapped the Mind Reading Potion entry. “Ye reckon the Guild’s sniffin’ around fer spies?”

Hargin grunted. “Wouldn’t surprise me.” He set the list down, cracking his knuckles. “Right. Let’s get to it.”

Hargin moved to his workbench, setting out his tools—glass flasks, distillation coils, mortar and pestle, and his enchanted stirring rod.

Snobbit, already refilling her mug, plopped down into a chair. “I’ll supervise.”

Hargin rolled his eyes, reaching for the first set of ingredients.

Hargin started with the simplest brew, a Potion of Healing—but even simple potions had to be made right. He crushed a small sliver of unicorn horn into a fine powder, mixing it with dried troll blood, which gave it its regenerative properties. The holy water acted as the binding agent, stabilizing the mixture into a bright red, faintly glowing liquid.

He swirled it in the flask, watching as the colors blended perfectly.

“Easy,” he muttered.

Snobbit stretched. “Aye, but now comes the fun stuff.”

Potion of Invisibility – Cloak of Shadows was trickier. Hargin carefully ground chameleon skin into a fine dust, mixing it with shadow essence, which had to be handled under low candlelight—too much exposure, and it lost potency. The final ingredient, distilled phase spider silk, had to be boiled and strained slowly, ensuring absolute purity.

The mixture turned a deep violet, shifting like liquid smoke.

Snobbit tapped the glass. “That’s eerie.”

Hargin smiled. “Aye. Means it’s workin’.”

For Potion of Fire Breath – Drink of the Dragon he took sulfur powder and dragon’s blood, mixing them over a low flame until the liquid thickened like syrup. Then, he added essence of flame, which had to be infused over an enchanted brazier. As soon as the potion stabilized, the liquid flickered with tiny embers, like it was alive.

Snobbit eyed it warily. “Ye’re tellin’ me drinkin’ that won’t kill someone?”

Hargin grinned. “Not if ye do it right.”

For potion of Flying – The Sky’s Call he crushed griffon wing dust, blending it with powdered air elemental core—which had to be done in precise ratios. The final step was adding a single feather from a giant eagle, which dissolved completely when the potion was mixed correctly. By the end, the liquid had a faint shimmer, light as air itself. Snobbit poked the flask. “Reckon I could float if I drank that?” Hargin snorted. “Aye. Right into a wall.”

The night went on, potion after potion.

Giant Strength. Gaseous Form. Speed. Heroism. Water Breathing. Mind Reading.

Each required precise alchemical skill, but in the end, they had ten completed vials, each labeled and sealed with wax sigils.

Hargin leaned back, cracking his stiff shoulders. “Done.”

Snobbit smiled. “An’ I barely had to lift a finger.”

Hargin grunted, wiping sweat from his brow. “Aye, ‘cause ye’re bloody useless.”

She grinned, tossing him a fresh mug of Raging Weasel.

“To another job done,” she said.

Hargin smiled, clinking his mug against hers.

“To more gold in our pockets.”

The Silver Task

Hargin walked into the Guildmaster’s chambers, the heavy wooden door creaking shut behind him.

Alvaric stood by his massive oak desk, his fingers lightly tapping on a silver ingot resting in front of him. His face was unreadable, but there was something grim in his usually measured gaze.

Hargin grunted, folding his arms. “So, what’s the job this time? Ye need me to mix up another batch o’ fancy potions?”

Alvaric shook his head. “No. This time, we need something... different.” He slid the silver ingot across the desk. “This will be your base ingredient.”

Hargin picked up the cool, heavy metal, raising a brow. “Silver, eh? What am I meltin’ this down for? Holy coins? Cursed cutlery?”

Alvaric’s gaze hardened. “A weapon.”

That got Hargin’s attention. He set the ingot back down. “Go on.”

Alvaric stepped around the desk, his robes flowing softly as he walked, and leaned against the table. “The Guild has received word of a... potential threat in the Noble District. A man of wealth and status, Lord Helvar, is suspected of being a vampire.”

Hargin exhaled. “Ah, bollocks.”

Alvaric nodded. “Aye. If the rumors are true, then he must be dealt with. But first, we need to be sure. That’s where you come in.”

He gestured to the silver ingot. “You’re going to forge a dagger. But not just any dagger. This one needs to be treated properly—infused with alchemical elements that burn the undead.”

Hargin scratched his thick beard, already thinking through the process. “Aye, I can mix somethin’ up. What exactly am I addin’ to the metal?”

Alvaric's sharp eyes met his. "You tell me."

Hargin smiled, crossing his arms. "Aye, testin' me, are ye?"

Alvaric allowed a small smile. "You've proven yourself capable, Ironheart. If I have to tell you the best way to kill a vampire, then perhaps I've overestimated you."

Hargin snorted. "Aye, fine. I'll do it." He grabbed the ingot, turning toward the door. "Anythin' else?"

Alvaric nodded. "Once the dagger is forged, you'll need a vial of goat's blood."

Hargin turned back, brow raised. "Goat's blood? Not human?"

Alvaric's gaze darkened. "A test. Vampires can resist their urges, but fresh blood—even animal blood—can stir their hunger. If Lord Helvar is what we suspect, he won't be able to ignore it."

Hargin exhaled. "Right. Silver, blood, vampire huntin'. Just another normal day, eh?"

Alvaric smiled faintly. "For you? Aye."

Back at his alchemy lab, Hargin cleared his workbench, setting the silver ingot in his crucible. He adjusted the bellows of his furnace, stoking the flames until the heat grew white-hot.

As the silver began to soften, he reached for his alchemical components. Blessed Rosemary Extract – A known repellent of undead, infused with consecrated oil. Crushed Nightshade Petals – Poisonous to the living, but disruptive to vampiric blood. Purified Essence of Sunstone – Absorbed sunlight into the metal, making it burn unholy flesh. Shavings from a Wooden Stake – Infused the silver with a trace of the weapon that ended countless vampires.

He ground the ingredients into a fine powder, then slowly poured them into the molten silver, watching the liquid metal hiss and bubble as it absorbed the alchemical mixture. The once-pure silver darkened slightly, taking on a faint, almost golden sheen—a sign that the infusion was working.

He worked carefully, ensuring the metal cooled properly before casting it into a thin, dagger-shaped mold.

Once cooled, the silver hardened, and Hargin carefully packed the raw ingot into a cloth-lined pouch.

"Right," he muttered, wiping the sweat from his brow. "Now to see Brightsteel."

The weaponsmith's forge was a place of precision and mastery, unlike the crude smithies where common steel was beaten into shape. Veylin Brightsteel, an elven master craftsman, worked alone, his delicate yet practiced hands shaping metal with unparalleled skill.

Hargin stepped into the sparking, smoke-filled workshop, greeted by the rhythmic clang-clang of hammer on steel. Veylin, tall and ageless as all elves seemed to be, glanced up from his work. His silver hair was tied back, his emerald eyes calculating.

“Hargin Ironheart,” Veylin murmured, setting down his hammer. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Hargin held up the cloth-wrapped ingot. “Got a job fer ye. Need a dagger made from this.”

Veylin took the ingot, inspecting it with a critical eye. He ran his fingers over the surface, sensing the alchemical infusions within.

“This is no ordinary silver,” he murmured.

Hargin nodded. “Aye. Need it shaped proper.”

Veylin turned, already walking toward his anvil. “I’ll need a few hours. A blade like this deserves patience.”

Hargin grinned. “Aye. I wouldn’t expect nothin’ less.”

While Veylin worked, Hargin turned to his next task—getting the goat’s blood.

He made his way to the Livestock Market, where farmers sold all manner of beasts. After some brief haggling, he bought a sturdy mountain goat from an old halfling herder.

Back at his shop, he worked quickly and cleanly, collecting the blood into a glass vial, sealing it with a wax stopper.

Snobbit watched from the doorway, arms crossed. “Ye do know there’s easier ways to spend a day, aye?”

Hargin wiped his hands. “Aye, but none as interestin’.”

That evening, with the silver dagger completed and the vial of blood secured, Hargin returned to the Guildhall.

Alvaric examined the blade, nodding approvingly. “Veylin does not disappoint.”

He took the vial of blood, holding it up to the candlelight. “Now, Ironheart, your task is simple—confirm what Lord Helvar truly is. If he is innocent, we walk away. If he is not...”

Hargin gripped the dagger, feeling the cold weight of silver in his palm.

“Aye,” he muttered. “I know what to do.”

Alvaric placed a small signet ring on the table.

“This will get you into Lord Helvar’s manor. You’ll pose as a guild investigator, questioning him on trade matters. You’ll have only a short window to test him.”

Hargin nodded. “An’ if he’s a bloodsucker?”

Alvaric’s eyes were cold. “Then you end him.”

Snobbit leaned against the wall, grinning. “Now this is gettin’ interestin’.”

Hargin exhaled, tucking the dagger into his belt.

“Right, then,” he muttered. “Let’s go find a vampire.”

The Noble District of Mazruth-Kul was a place of wealth and history, where the streets were lined with grand estates, each boasting tall iron gates, pristine courtyards, and banners of ancient lineages. But among these proud homes of nobility, one stood apart.

Lord Helvar’s manor loomed, a gloomy structure of aged stone and ivy-choked walls, its tall, narrow windows like watching eyes. Unlike its neighbors—where lamplight glowed warmly from within—Helvar’s house stood in eerie silence, the shutters drawn, the air around it heavier than the rest of the street.

Hargin and Snobbit stood before the tall, wrought-iron gate, staring up at the darkened facade.

Snobbit wrinkled her nose. “Well. If this ain’t the most welcomin’ house I’ve ever seen.”

Hargin grunted, adjusting his belt where the silver dagger rested, concealed beneath his coat. “Aye. Let’s get this over with.”

He rapped his knuckles against the heavy oak door, the sound echoing into the stillness of the house.

For a moment, nothing.

Then—a soft creak as the door inched open.

A thin man in dark formal attire stood before them, his expression blank, his eyes sunken but watchful.

“The master is not expecting visitors,” the servant said, his voice low and even.

Hargin flashed the Guild’s signet ring. “We ain’t visitors. We’re here on official guild business. Lord Helvar is required to answer a few questions.”

The servant’s gaze flicked to the ring, and after a brief pause, he stepped aside.

“Very well. Please, come in.”

The inside of the manor was no warmer than its exterior. The air was cold, stale, carrying the scent of dust, aged fabric, and something faintly metallic.

They were led to the living room, a dimly lit space filled with old, ornate furniture.

A massive stone fireplace dominated one wall, but the hearth was bare, its logs untouched. A great chandelier hung overhead, though only a handful of candles flickered weakly within it.

The furniture was elegant but aged—a high-backed chair with carved wooden arms, a long mahogany table, and shelves lined with thick, leather-bound tomes.

Snobbit ran a finger along the dust-covered bookshelf and muttered, “Aye, real cozy.”

The servant motioned for them to sit, then disappeared down a darkened hall.

Hargin lowered himself into a rigid wooden chair, his back straight.

Snobbit, on the other hand, flopped onto a velvet-cushioned armchair, legs crossed lazily. “Well,” she murmured, glancing around. “Ain’t the liveliest place, is it?”

Hargin didn’t answer. He was watching the shadows, listening to the silence of the house.

A few moments later, soft footsteps approached.

And then, Lord Helvar entered.

The man who stepped into the candlelight was the very image of nobility.

Tall, lean, and well-dressed, Helvar wore a deep crimson coat with gold embroidery, a fine silk shirt beneath, and a signet ring of his house upon one long, slender hand.

His face was sharp, aristocratic, with high cheekbones and piercing blue eyes. His dark hair was slicked back, not a strand out of place.

He moved gracefully, lowering himself into the great chair by the fireplace, folding one long leg over the other.

“You must be the Guild representatives,” he said, his voice smooth and cultured. “I was not informed of any such meeting.”

Hargin nodded, keeping his tone neutral. “Aye. We apologize fer the unannounced visit, m’lord. The Alchemist’s Guild is conducting a review on trade interests and alchemical supply lines in the Noble District. Yer name came up, so here we are.”

Helvar steepled his fingers. “How very... thorough of you.”

Snobbit grinned, resting her chin on her hand. “Aye, well. Paperwork piles up, ye know? We like to make sure things are runnin’ all proper-like.”

Helvar smiled faintly. “Of course. I am always happy to cooperate with the Guild.”

Hargin leaned forward slightly. “Then let’s get straight to it. Do ye deal in alchemical goods, m’lord?”

Helvar's eyes flicked toward him, calm, unreadable. "Only occasionally. Some rare wines, a few medicinal draughts. Nothing of serious import."

Hargin nodded. "An' where do ye source these goods?"

Helvar smiled. "I leave such things to my steward, Master Wilkes. He ensures all my purchases are properly handled."

Snobbit tilted her head. "Aye? Ever dealt directly with any o' the lesser-known merchants? Some folks've been movin' goods off the books lately."

Helvar's smile did not waver. "I conduct all my business above board. If there are unsavory elements in the trade, I am unaware of them."

Hargin studied him. The man was poised, polite, and utterly in control.

Too much in control.

Most nobles—even the honest ones—reacted to unexpected questioning with some form of annoyance, impatience, or arrogance.

Helvar? Nothing.

He answered smoothly, without hesitation, without concern.

Snobbit glanced at Hargin. He could tell she felt it too—something wasn't right.

But so far, nothing overtly suspicious.

If Helvar was a vampire, he was damn good at pretending to be a man.

Helvar folded his hands. "Are there any further questions? Or have I sufficiently addressed your concerns?"

The dim candlelight flickered as the conversation stretched on, the tension slowly coiling tighter like a spring ready to snap. Lord Helvar sat calm and collected, his sharp blue eyes unwavering, but Hargin wasn't fooled. The man was too composed. Too perfect.

Snobbit tapped her fingers against the wooden table, feigning boredom. "Ye've got quite the fancy place here, m'lord. Fine architecture, old furniture. How long's yer family been livin' in this estate?"

Helvar smiled thinly, resting his fingers against the table. "Quite some time. The Helvar lineage predates the founding of Mazruth-Kul itself."

Hargin raised a brow. "Aye? That's a long time."

Helvar nodded. "Indeed. My ancestors were among the first nobles to settle this land. We were merchants, scholars, and—when necessary—warriors. We built this home centuries ago, and it has remained in my family's possession ever since."

Hargin stroked his beard, watching the way Helvar spoke with practiced ease. “Funny. If that’s true, I’d have expected to see portraits of past generations hangin’ about. Most noble families love showin’ off their ancestry.”

Helvar’s smile didn’t falter. “Portraits fade. Legends do not.”

Snobbit leaned forward, elbows on the table. “An’ what o’ yer household? Yer servants, yer staff—they been with ye long?”

Helvar gestured toward the door. “Master Wilkes, my steward, has served me for over twenty years. My household is small—I value discretion over excess.”

Hargin grunted. “Discretion, eh? That’s a convenient word fer keepin’ secrets.”

Helvar’s smile widened ever so slightly. “Every noble has secrets, Master Ironheart. Some more than others.”

Hargin leaned back, drumming his fingers on the table. “Aye. That brings me to another matter.”

He let a pause stretch before adding, “Alchemy.”

Helvar tilted his head slightly. “Ah. And what of it?”

Hargin studied him, watching for the smallest reaction. “Ye ever deal in restricted substances? Things best left unmentioned?”

Helvar’s fingers remained still. “I assure you, my dealings are entirely legal.”

Snobbit shrugged, looking around the dusty bookshelves. “Aye? An’ yet ye don’t keep much record o’ them. Strange for a noble.”

Helvar’s gaze flicked to her, just for an instant. “My business is handled through private channels. I have no need for ledgers cluttering my home.”

Hargin sighed, shaking his head. “Shame, really. Ye see, we came across somethin’... unusual.”

Helvar raised a brow. “Oh?”

Hargin reached into his coat, his fingers closing around the cool glass of the vial. He pulled it out, holding it up just enough for Helvar to see.

“A rare substance,” Hargin murmured. “Ever seen this before?”

The room fell silent.

Helvar’s blue eyes flicked to the vial, his expression neutral. He reached out, delicate fingers curling around the glass.

For a moment, nothing.

He turned the vial slowly, watching the thick crimson liquid shift inside.

But then—

His breathing hitched.

A faint, low moan escaped his throat, almost inaudible.

His fingers tightened around the vial as if it had suddenly become precious beyond words.

The change came slowly at first—his skin paled, the once noble complexion taking on an almost ashen hue.

His irises darkened, shifting from icy blue to a deep, abyssal black.

Then his jaw clenched, the muscles tensing unnaturally. His lips pulled back slightly, revealing elongated canines, sharp as daggers.

Snobbit went still.

Hargin didn't move, his voice low and steady.

“Well, well,” he said, grinning slightly. “A real lord, are we?”

Helvar exhaled, setting the vial gently onto the table. His fingers trembled for a moment before he regained his composure. He straightened his shoulders, his smile returning—only this time, it was different.

Cold. Unapologetic.

“You're quite perceptive, Master Ironheart,” he murmured. “And bolder than most.”

Hargin placed his hand on his belt, close to the hidden silver dagger. “Aye. An' I'm guessin' ye got a story to tell.”

Helvar chuckled—a rich, knowing laugh. He folded his hands once more, leaning forward.

“Oh, I do,” he said. “And since you've been so persistent, allow me to educate you.”

Helvar's dark gaze swept over them both.

“My family's history is not written in city records nor guild ledgers. It is a history older than Mazruth-Kul itself.”

He gestured vaguely toward the shadows lining the room.

“Thousands of years ago, when these lands were still wild and unclaimed, the first Helvar lords ruled a different kingdom—one of blood and shadow.”

Hargin's grip tightened on his belt. "A kingdom o' what, exactly?"

Helvar's smile grew sharper. "Vampires, of course."

Snobbit exhaled sharply. "Well, shite."

Helvar continued, unbothered. "We were once noble warriors, conquerors of the night, feared and respected alike. We held dominion over entire regions, our courts shimmering with dark splendor."

His eyes gleamed. "In those days, we did not hide. We ruled openly, taking tribute in gold and blood. Our knights were undying, our scholars ancient beyond mortal reckoning."

Hargin narrowed his gaze. "An' what happened?"

Helvar's smile faded slightly. "The world changed."

He leaned back, voice almost wistful.

"The mortals grew... bold. Empires rose, kings rallied armies, and faith forged weapons of silver and sunlight."

His fingers drifted toward the vial of blood, but he didn't touch it again.

"We were hunted. Driven from our castles, forced into the dark corners of civilization. My ancestors—once lords of the night—were reduced to mere whispers in history."

His gaze hardened. "But we never vanished. We merely... adapted."

Hargin's jaw tightened. "So what now? Ye just sit here, playin' the noble lord while ye feed on the folk of Mazruth-Kul?"

Helvar sighed, shaking his head. "You misunderstand. I have no interest in reckless slaughter. I do not drain the innocent in alleyways or leave corpses in the streets."

His black eyes gleamed. "I am far more... refined."

Snobbit muttered, "That's a fancy way of sayin' ye still drink blood."

Helvar's lips curled. "Oh, I do. But with... discretion."

Hargin's stomach churned. The Guild had been right. This wasn't just some rumor or hysteria.

Lord Helvar was a vampire. A real, breathing (or not breathing) threat.

Hargin stood slowly, his fingers wrapping around the hilt of the silver dagger at his belt. The firelight gleamed off the polished blade, its edge catching the glow like a sliver of moonlight.

"This," he said, his voice low and steady, "must be put to an end."

Lord Helvar's darkened eyes flicked toward the weapon.

Then, he laughed.

It was not a chuckle, nor a scoff—it was a full-bodied, amused, genuine laugh, as if Hargin had just told the greatest joke in the world.

“You barbarians,” Helvar murmured, shaking his head. “No grace, no manners. No respect for history.”

A shadow moved in the corner of the room.

Hargin's stomach tightened as the servant stepped forward, his stoic mask now cracked into a sinister grin. His formerly thin, sickly frame had changed, his limbs longer, muscles taut with unnatural strength. His mouth parted slightly, revealing fangs wet with saliva, and his fingers curled into claw-like talons.

“Ah, ye're both bloodsuckers,” Snobbit muttered, flipping a dagger into her palm. “Should've guessed.”

Helvar sighed dramatically. “Kill them. But not too quickly. I do so love when a meal struggles.”

The servant vanished. One moment he was there—the next, he was gone. Then—pain.

Snobbit barely had time to raise her blade before the servant's fist smashed into her ribs, sending her crashing against the bookshelves, splinters and dust exploding into the air.

Hargin swung his dagger, but Helvar was faster.

A blur of motion, and suddenly Helvar was behind him. A cold grip clamped around Hargin's wrist, squeezing hard enough to make his bones creak.

Then—he was airborne.

Helvar hurled him across the room as if he weighed nothing at all.

Hargin collided with the stone wall, the impact knocking the air from his lungs as he crumpled onto the floor.

Snobbit coughed, pushing herself up—only for the servant's foot to slam into her back, pinning her against the ground.

Helvar strode forward, slowly, deliberately, his gaze filled with something almost playful.

“Dwarves,” he mused. “Your blood is... robust. Rich with the weight of the earth.”

Then he crouched, grabbing Hargin by the throat, lifting him effortlessly.

Hargin struggled, his fists hammering against Helvar's arm, but the vampire didn't even flinch.

Then—fangs sank deep into his neck.

Hargin's roar of fury turned into a guttural, strangled gasp as his blood was drained from him, the sensation both freezing and burning at once.

Snobbit screamed, thrashing beneath the servant's hold. "GET OFF HIM, YE BLEEDIN' LEECH!"

Helvar sighed in pleasure, his mouth pulling away from the wound, a thin trail of crimson dripping from his lips.

"Delightful," he murmured.

Then everything faded to black.

Hargin drifted between consciousness and oblivion, the world around him nothing but blurry shapes and distant sounds.

A damp, stench-filled air filled his nose—a mixture of decay, blood, and damp stone.

Groans. Shuffling. Weak, half-formed whispers.

He was somewhere else now.

Somewhere worse.

His head lolled to the side, and his vision swam—but he saw enough.

They were in a stone chamber, deep underground. A cellar, or a crypt.

The walls were lined with chains and iron restraints, the floor slick with old blood.

And they weren't alone.

Bodies.

Living, but barely.

Emaciated figures, tied to the walls, their eyes hollow and vacant, their veins blackened from years of feeding. Some of them twitched weakly, their lips cracked, their skin stretched thin over bone.

A feeding stock.

A larder of the damned.

Snobbit lay slumped beside him, pale and barely breathing.

“Ah,” Helvar’s voice echoed softly, smooth as silk. “You’re awake.”

Hargin tried to move—but he had no strength. His limbs felt like lead, his body cold and empty.

Helvar stood above them, his servant by his side, both smiling down like hunters admiring their kill.

The servant knelt, grabbing Snobbit’s chin, tilting her head.

“I do enjoy a good halfling vintage,” the servant purred.

Then he sank his fangs into her throat.

Snobbit twitched, then screamed, her weak limbs jerking uselessly.

Hargin let out a hoarse, broken snarl, but he could do nothing.

Helvar watched, amused. “Oh, don’t look so distraught. She’ll live. For now.”

He knelt, pressing a cold hand against Hargin’s forehead.

“Dwarves, however... you take longer to break.”

Then he sank his fangs into Hargin’s throat once more.

Pain.

More darkness.

A deep, guttural chanting rumbled through the chamber, the voices of the undead echoing off the stone walls.

Hargin’s eyes fluttered open, his vision clouded.

Torches burned in sconces, their flames casting eerie shadows. The blood-stained floor had been cleared, and in the center, an ancient sigil had been drawn in crimson ink—a twisting mark of demonic design.

And in the middle of it—Snobbit.

Her limp form was placed upon the sigil, her small chest rising and falling weakly.

Around her, they gathered.

Vampires.

A dozen of them, emerging from a hidden doorway in the stone wall—pale figures in tattered noble garments, their features withered but regal, their eyes burning with crimson hunger.

Helvar stood before them, his arms raised.

His voice was no longer smooth and charming. It was ancient. Hollow.

He spoke words older than the city itself—a chant of summoning, of binding, of unholy power.

"From blood and night, we call thee forth,"

"Bound by shadow, born of wrath."

"Rise once more, forgotten king,"

"Claim thy flesh, embrace thy path."

The sigil beneath Snobbit began to glow, the blood seeping into the cracks of the stone.

Hargin gritted his teeth, fighting the weight of exhaustion, forcing himself to move.

He would not die like this. He would not let them take Snobbit. Summoning every last ounce of strength, he reached for his belt— And his fingers brushed against cold silver.

Alvaric paced the stone floors of the Alchemist's Guild, his brow furrowed, hands clasped tightly behind his back. His normally calm and measured demeanor was cracking.

Hargin and Snobbit had been gone too long.

The mission should have been simple—investigate, confirm, return.

But hours had passed into a full day, and there had been no word.

His boots clicked against the floor as he turned sharply. Something was wrong.

His eyes flicked to two alchemists standing nearby—Journeyman Edran Mirkvale and Olia Fenmoor, two of his most trusted members.

He stopped pacing and spoke, his voice low and firm.

"We've waited long enough. Hargin and Snobbit should have returned by now. Something is wrong."

Olia, a half-elven woman with sharp hazel eyes, nodded. "You think Lord Helvar was... what the rumors said?"

Alvaric's jaw tightened. "I fear worse. If they are alive, we will bring them back. If they are not... we will purge that estate of whatever unholy creatures reside within."

He turned on his heel. "Gather your things. We go to the City Watch."

The City Watch garrison was alive with torches, armor clanking, and the barking of orders.

Alvaric and his two alchemists stood before Captain Erwald, a grizzled, scarred veteran with years of battle in his eyes.

“You’re telling me a nobleman in my district is a vampire?” Erwald asked, crossing his massive arms.

Alvaric’s gaze was steely. “I am saying two of my people entered his estate and never returned.”

Erwald studied him, then let out a low growl. “If this is a false alarm, Guildmaster, I’ll be writing complaints in the morning.”

Alvaric stepped closer, his tone deadly serious. “And if it is not?”

Erwald exhaled sharply. Then he turned and barked orders to his men.

Within minutes, twenty-five watchmen stood ready—fully armed, torches and weapons in hand. The time for talk had passed. They marched for Lord Helvar’s estate.

The iron gates were shut, the manor silent. No lights, no movement—not even the wind stirred the ivy-covered walls.

Erwald frowned. “No guards?”

Olia murmured. “They don’t need them.”

The City Watch approached the massive oak doors. Erwald banged his fist against the wood.

“Lord Helvar! By order of the City Watch, open these doors!”

Silence.

Erwald waited, then nodded to his men.

“Break it down.”

A watchman stepped forward, a heavy battering ram in his grip.

THUD!

The door splintered.

THUD! The hinges cracked. THUD! The doors burst open, revealing darkened halls, lined with dust and shadows.

“Move!” Erwald barked.

The watchmen flooded in, swords drawn, torches raised, searching room to room.

But the estate was empty.

No servants. No footsteps. Not even the echo of life.

Alvaric's stomach twisted. Then, his eyes fell upon a smaller door in the back of the hall—half-concealed in the shadows.

A cellar door.

The watchmen tore the door open, revealing a narrow, spiraling staircase descending into the abyss.

The moment they stepped down, the smell hit them. Blood. Rot. The stench of death. And then—the chanting.

A deep, guttural chorus of inhuman voices reverberated through the stone walls, words older than the city itself.

The chamber below was a nightmare of flickering torchlight and writhing shadows.

Thirteen vampires, clad in tattered noble garb, stood in a circle, surrounding a bloodstained sigil.

Snobbit lay motionless in the center, her small body draped across the glowing demonic markings.

Hargin was chained to the wall, barely conscious, his face pale, his neck still dripping from fresh bites.

And standing before them—Lord Helvar.

His eyes burned black, his mouth wet with blood, his fingers curled like talons.

He turned slowly as the intruders burst into the cellar, his voice thick with ancient power.

“Fools.”

Erwald didn't hesitate.

“KILL THEM!”

The cellar erupted into chaos.

The watchmen charged, swords clashing against inhuman flesh as the vampires snarled and leapt, moving with impossible speed.

A guard swung his blade at Helvar—the vampire caught it mid-air, his fingers crushing the steel as if it were paper.

With a twist, he shattered the blade and drove his fist straight through the man's chest.

Screams filled the air as fangs found throats, as claws tore through armor.

A vampire ripped a guard's head clean from his shoulders, sending his body crashing against the ritual altar.

A second watchman was grabbed from behind, his neck snapped with one swift motion.

The vampires were stronger, faster—but they weren't invincible.

Alvaric hurled a vial of alchemist's fire, the flames exploding across the room, engulfing three of the undead in burning agony.

Olia raised her silver-coated crossbow, loosing a bolt—it pierced a vampire's skull, the creature screeching as it crumpled into dust.

Erwald hacked through one's chest, shoving it backward as his men rallied.

One by one, the vampires fell—but so did the watchmen.

Ten men died screaming, their blood soaking the floor, their bodies torn apart in the frenzy.

But the tide turned. One vampire fell. Then another. And then, only Helvar remained.

The ancient vampire stood alone, surrounded by fire, steel, and dying embers of his kin. His cold black gaze swept over them, unreadable. Then he smiled. "You think you have won?" he whispered.

Alvaric stepped forward, gripping a silvered blade. "No," he said, "but we're about to."

Helvar's body tensed— And then Erwald's sword slashed across his throat. A guttural snarl ripped from Helvar's lips as his blood sprayed against the walls, but still, he stood.

Alvaric drove his silver blade into Helvar's chest, twisting it.

The vampire let out a horrid, inhuman shriek, his body convulsing, his limbs trembling.

Then—his skin cracked like shattered porcelain. He let out one final breath— And collapsed into dust.

Hargin felt the shackles break, his body slumping forward. Snobbit stirred, groaning weakly.

Alvaric knelt, checking Hargin's pulse.

"You're alive."

Hargin coughed, voice hoarse. "Aye. Barely."

Snobbit groaned. "We kill 'im?"

Erwald kicked Helvar's ashes. "Aye."

Hargin exhaled.

“Good.”

Then everything went dark.

The air in the cellar was thick with smoke, blood, and the lingering stench of death. The bodies of the slain vampires had turned to piles of smoldering ash, but the weight of the battle still pressed upon them.

Alvaric knelt beside Hargin and Snobbit, retrieving two small vials from his satchel. Their contents glowed faintly—an alchemical antidote, a counter to the vampiric venom now coursing through their veins.

“Drink,” Alvaric ordered, pressing a vial into Hargin’s hand before uncorking the other for Snobbit.

Hargin sniffed the liquid—it smelled of burnt herbs and metal.

“Ye sure this ain’t just poison?” he muttered, wincing as his aching body protested.

Alvaric sighed. “If I wanted you dead, dwarf, I’d have let the vampires finish the job.”

Hargin grunted and downed the potion. A searing heat spread through his chest, his limbs tingling, but the weakness that had gripped him began to fade.

Snobbit groaned, sitting up with a dazed expression. “Oh, that’s a lovely headache.”

The fifteen surviving watchmen stood ready, their armor dented, their expressions grim. They had lost ten men already, and now, they were about to go deeper.

At the far side of the cellar, the hidden passage yawned open—a tunnel carved into the stone, leading into the unknown.

Alvaric tightened his grip on his staff. “Whatever’s left of Helvar’s kind, they’re down there.”

Hargin rolled his shoulders, spitting blood onto the ground. “Then let’s finish this.”

With torches in hand, they stepped into the darkness below.

The tunnel was narrow and winding, its walls damp with centuries of condensation. The air smelled of rot, old blood, and something ancient—a presence that watched them from the shadows.

Hargin took point with Erwald, their torches casting flickering light across the stone passage. Snobbit stumbled slightly, still shaking off the effects of blood loss.

Then—movement.

From the darkness ahead, three figures emerged.

Vampires.

They moved fast, too fast—blurs of black robes and gleaming fangs.

“CONTACT!” Erwald bellowed, raising his sword.

The first vampire slammed into a guard, its claws ripping through chainmail like parchment, blood spraying across the walls.

Hargin roared, swinging his hammer—but the creature ducked, raking its talons across his side.

Snobbit dove forward, her dagger flashing, stabbing the vampire in the throat. The creature hissed but did not stop, grabbing her by the neck and lifting her off the ground.

Alvaric threw a vial, smashing it against the vampire’s face—holy fire erupted, engulfing it in white-hot flames.

The creature screamed, thrashing, before collapsing into ash.

The second vampire lunged at Erwald, slashing his face open, but the captain planted a silvered sword into its chest—it convulsed violently before dropping lifelessly.

The third vampire tackled Olia, pinning her to the ground—its fangs bared, ready to tear into her throat.

Hargin charged, gripping his hammer with both hands and bringing it down with all his might—a sickening crunch echoed through the tunnels as the creature’s skull caved in.

Breathing heavily, they surveyed the scene. Three vampires dead—but more still lurked ahead.

Then Snobbit, wiping blood from her lip, muttered, “Ye feel that?”

A chill ran down Hargin’s spine.

Something was watching them.

Then they heard it—a low, wet breathing.

And they saw the nest.

The tunnel widened into a vast stone cavern, its ceiling lost in shadows.

And hanging from that darkness—eight sleeping vampires.

They hung like grotesque bats, their long fingers curled, their chests rising and falling with unnatural stillness.

The walls were lined with half-eaten corpses, dried husks stripped of all but their bones.

A single drip of water echoed through the chamber.

Hargin's grip tightened on his hammer. "Shite."

Erwald gestured for silence, his men raising their weapons slowly.

They crept forward, trying to move past unseen.

Then—one of the watchmen stepped on a brittle bone.

CRACK.

The vampires' eyes snapped open.

A heartbeat later, the creatures dropped from the ceiling.

Then—all hell broke loose.

The vampires descended upon them like demons, their inhuman screeches filling the cavern.

A watchman barely had time to scream before claws tore out his throat.

Another was lifted into the air, his armor crushed like paper, blood gushing as his head was torn from his shoulders.

Hargin swung wildly, his hammer connecting with one monster's ribs—but it merely snarled, its wound healing before his eyes.

Erwald cut through another, severing its arm, but the beast kept coming, sinking its fangs into his shoulder.

Snobbit stabbed a vampire in the eye, only for another to grab her by the waist and hurl her across the chamber.

She hit the stone wall with a sickening crack—then went limp.

Alvaric flung a dozen vials, explosions of holy fire lighting the cavern, but the vampires fought through the flames, their charred flesh regenerating before their eyes.

One watchman screamed as he was torn in half, his entrails spilling across the floor.

Another had his chest crushed, ribs snapping like dry twigs.

Hargin fought until his muscles burned, but there were too many.

A vampire grabbed him, lifting him like a ragdoll, then threw him against the wall.

Hargin crashed into the stone, his skull snapping backward. Blood poured from his nose and ears.

He struggled to stay conscious, watching as Erwald was dragged down, his body ripped apart by three of the creatures.

Alvaric let out a hoarse cry, his chest riddled with claw marks, blood dripping from his robes.

The last of the watchmen fell, their bodies broken, lifeless.

The last vampire screeched—Then Alvaric threw his final vial. A massive explosion of alchemical fire engulfed the cavern, roaring through the tunnels, consuming everything.

The vampires shrieked in agony, their bodies reduced to blackened husks. The ritual chamber collapsed, dust and stone raining from above. Hargin coughed up blood, his vision swimming.

Alvaric limped forward, his hand on Hargin's shoulder.

"We... we have to move," Alvaric gasped.

Hargin turned—Snobbit lay unmoving, blood dripping from her mouth.

He staggered to her side, shaking her. "Lass... wake up!"

A weak groan escaped her lips. She was alive—barely.

With the last of their strength, the survivors crawled toward the exit, dragging themselves up the ruined tunnel, their bodies broken and drenched in blood. They set the house on fire.

They stumbled into the moonlight, leaving the nightmare behind.

And as Lord Helvar's estate burned behind them, the last remnants of the ancient vampire clan finally met their end.

Sewers

The city of Mazruth-Kul had barely settled after the vampire purge, yet trouble never truly rested.

A new problem had begun to fester—in the depths below.

Rumors whispered of mutated creatures crawling through the sewer tunnels, their forms twisted by alchemical corruption.

At first, it was just talk—drunken beggars and sewer workers swearing they’d seen things skittering in the dark. Then the disappearances started. Sewer maintenance crews went missing. Fishermen by the drainage canals vanished overnight.

And now, something had to be done.

Hargin sat hunched over his workbench, grinding dried basilisk scales into a fine powder, his fingers stained with alchemical residue.

Beside him, Snobbit poured herself another mug of Raging Weasel, her feet propped up on a pile of old tomes.

“Ye know,” she muttered between sips, “it’s been, what? Two weeks? Maybe three? I was hopin’ we’d have at least a month before somethin’ else needed killin’.”

Hargin grunted, tipping the ground powder into a bubbling flask of green liquid.

“Aye,” he muttered. “City’s a cesspit o’ trouble, always has been. No surprise the actual cesspit has gone bad too.”

Before Snobbit could reply, a sharp knock echoed at the door.

Hargin frowned, setting down his stirring rod. “Aye?”

The door creaked open, revealing a young guild runner—breathless, pale-faced.

“Master Ironheart,” the lad stammered. “Guildmaster Alvaric needs you. Urgently.”

Hargin sighed, wiping his hands on a cloth. “What now?”

The Guildhall was bustling when Hargin and Snobbit arrived.

Alvaric stood before a large city map, his face deeply lined, his finger tracing the sewer pathways.

Olia Fenmoor and Edran Mirkvale—two of the surviving alchemists from the vampire purge—were hunched over a collection of flasks, vials, and parchment, muttering furiously.

Alvaric looked up as they entered.

“Good,” he said. “We have a problem. A serious one.”

Hargin folded his arms. “Aye, I figured. What are we dealin’ with?”

Alvaric gestured to a sealed jar on the table. Inside, a twisted, pulsating lump of flesh quivered unnaturally.

Snobbit recoiled. “Hells—what is that?”

Olia frowned. “That, dear Snobbit, is what was once a sewer rat.”

Snobbit blinked. “Oh. Oh, that ain’t right.”

Alvaric nodded gravely. “Something is mutating the creatures in the lower tunnels. At first, it was just rats—bigger, more aggressive. But then reports came in of giant slimes with human limbs, roaches with armored plating, and creatures that defy description.”

Hargin exhaled through his nose. “An alchemical accident?”

Edran shook his head. “That was our first thought. We checked the Guild’s records—no known spills, no failed experiments. This isn’t from us.”

Alvaric’s gaze darkened. “Which means it’s coming from somewhere else.”

Snobbit narrowed her eyes. “Or someone else.”

Alvaric nodded. “You’re going to find out which. Your task is twofold—investigate the cause, and eliminate the creatures.”

Hargin rolled his shoulders, feeling the weight of his hammer against his back.

“Aye,” he muttered. “Sounds like a fine way to ruin an afternoon.”

The entrance to the sewers lay beneath a rusted iron grate in the Docks District, where the city’s filth drained into the lower tunnels.

The air was thick with the stench of rot, stagnant water, and decay.

Hargin dropped down first, his boots splashing into ankle-deep muck.

Snobbit followed, landing lightly beside him. She grimaced. “I swear, we end up in more shite-covered places than any normal folk should.”

Hargin grinned. “Aye. Welcome to adventurin’.”

With torches in hand, they moved forward, the stone tunnels stretching endlessly in both directions. The ceiling dripped, and the only sounds were the occasional skittering of unseen vermin.

They hadn’t gone fifty paces before the first attack.

A low growl echoed from the darkness.

Hargin stopped mid-step, his fingers tightening around his hammer.

Then—movement.

A massive, bloated rat scuttled into view, its flesh pulsing, its eyes an unnatural, glowing red.

Another appeared beside it. Then another.

Three of them—each the size of a hound, their fur matted with filth, their jaws lined with multiple rows of jagged teeth.

Snobbit drew her daggers. “Biggest damn rats I’ve ever seen.”

The lead rat hissed—and then they charged.

Hargin swung first, his hammer crashing into the skull of the first beast, splintering bone and sending it skidding across the stone floor.

The second rat lunged at Snobbit—she twisted just in time, slicing a deep gash across its throat.

The third leapt onto Hargin’s back, its claws raking against his armor.

He grunted, staggered, then slammed his back into the sewer wall, crushing the beast between stone and steel.

The creature twitched once—then fell lifeless into the filth.

Snobbit wiped her blade on her sleeve. “That all of ‘em?”

Then—the walls moved.

Or rather, something within the walls moved.

And from the dark, oozing cracks in the stone, something massive began to emerge.

A slime.

But not like any normal ooze.

This one was pulsing, its body a semi-transparent gelatin filled with half-digested remains. And within it—bones floated, shifting.

Not just animal bones.

Human.

The ooze surged forward.

Hargin’s eyes narrowed. “Oh, this is gonna be a bastard.”

The ooze lunged, its body extending like a whip, lashing out.

Hargin barely had time to raise his hammer before the gelatinous mass struck, the impact sending him sliding back into the muck.

Snobbit dove sideways, rolling into the shadows.

The slime lurched forward, its amorphous body shifting—and suddenly, a humanoid limb burst from within, twisted fingers grasping for Hargin’s throat.

Snobbit shouted, “It’s absorbin’ bodies!”

Hargin gritted his teeth, raising his flask of alchemical fire.

"Then let’s see if it burns."

He hurled the flask—the moment it shattered against the creature’s surface, fire exploded outward, consuming the slime in a burst of orange flame.

The monster shrieked—not just one voice, but many, the echoes of the absorbed victims trapped within.

As it writhed and convulsed, Snobbit rushed in, slicing a deep gash across its core—and with a horrid, gurgling screech, the beast collapsed into a steaming, lifeless pool.

Both of them stood there, panting.

Snobbit spat onto the ground. “Hells. If that was the welcome committee, I don’t wanna see what’s waitin’ deeper in.”

Hargin wiped slime from his beard.

“Aye,” he muttered, “but we ain’t stoppin’ now.”

Because whatever was down there—whoever had done this—They needed to be stopped.

The tunnels stretched on, winding through the city’s forgotten depths, the air thick with stench and decay. The mutant slime lay in a smoldering heap, its remains slowly sinking into the filthy sewer water.

Hargin wiped a hand across his face, still feeling the tingling burn where some of the ooze had splattered onto his skin.

Snobbit took a deep breath, then gagged. “Ugh. Smells worse now. Burnt slime an’ sewer filth don’t mix well.”

Hargin grunted, gripping his hammer tighter. “Aye. Let’s keep movin’. Somethin’ made that thing, an’ I wanna know what.”

They pressed forward, their torchlight flickering off the damp stone walls, shadows twisting like lurking creatures just beyond sight.

Ahead, the tunnel widened into a larger chamber, an old maintenance room long abandoned by the city’s workers.

And at the center of the room, half-submerged in rancid water—was a corpse.

Hargin approached first, crouching beside the bloated body. The man's clothes were torn, his flesh gray and swollen, his eyes sunken.

But it wasn't drowning that had killed him.

His arms and legs were twisted unnaturally, his veins blackened, and his mouth frozen in a rictus scream.

Snobbit nudged a waterlogged journal that lay beside him, its pages mushy but still legible.

She picked it up, flipping through the ruined parchment.

"Looks like a log," she muttered, squinting at the messy scrawl.

Hargin leaned over. "What's it say?"

Snobbit frowned, reading aloud.

"Tried to warn them. Strange chemicals in the water... creatures not natural. Something alive down here... mutating them. Need to get out... but I hear them... in the dark... watching."

She turned to the final entry, the words barely legible.

"This isn't an accident. Someone did this. Someone is experimenting on the sewers."

Hargin exhaled slowly, rolling his shoulders. "Well. That confirms it."

Snobbit shut the journal, tucking it into her belt pouch. "Aye. But who?"

Before Hargin could answer, a low skittering sound echoed from the far side of the chamber.

Something was coming.

The first thing they saw were the eyes.

Hundreds of them. Glowing red pinpricks, reflecting in the torchlight, moving fast.

Then came the clicking mandibles.

A swarm of twisted roaches burst from the shadows—larger than any normal insect, their bodies coated in chitin as dark as obsidian, their legs unnaturally long.

Snobbit paled. "Nope. No. Absolutely not."

The swarm rushed forward.

Hargin roared, swinging his hammer into the oncoming mass, crushing a cluster of the creatures instantly. The chitin cracked, a sickening squelch accompanying the impact.

Snobbit flicked her wrist, flinging two daggers—both blades slammed into the skulls of the largest roaches, dropping them instantly.

But the swarm kept coming.

One of the insects latched onto Hargin's leg, sinking its serrated mandibles into his boot. He growled, shaking it off and stomping down hard, feeling the sickening crunch beneath his heel.

Snobbit leapt onto a rusted pipe, using the higher ground to slash downward, cutting into the creatures as they crawled up the walls.

More kept pouring in.

Hargin gritted his teeth. "We need a bloody firebomb!"

Snobbit dug into her pouch, yanking out a vial. "Good news! I got one!"

She lit the fuse and hurled it—the moment the glass shattered, fire exploded outward, engulfing the swarm in a wave of alchemical heat.

The insects screeched, their bodies charring, the stench of burning carapace filling the chamber.

After a few long moments, the screeching stopped.

Snobbit wiped sweat from her brow. "Hells. I hate bugs."

Hargin shook his head. "Aye. An' whatever's causin' this ain't done yet."

The tunnel sloped downward, leading into a section of the sewer system that should not have existed.

The stonework was different—newer, reinforced with alchemical runes.

And then they saw it.

A door.

A massive iron door, locked with intricate sigils, glowing faintly with arcane energy.

Snobbit ran a hand over the metal. "This ain't sewer maintenance. This is a lab."

Hargin nodded. "Aye. An' I think we found our experimenter."

Snobbit grinned, drawing her lockpicks.

"Time to meet the bastard, then."

Hargin cracked his knuckles.

And the door creaked open.

The iron door groaned as it swung open, revealing a dimly lit chamber beyond. The air shifted immediately, the overwhelming stench of decay and chemicals pressing against Hargin and Snobbit like a physical weight.

Rows of rusted metal tables lined the walls, each littered with broken glass vials, stained surgical tools, and half-decayed remains of... something. Flickering green alchemical lanterns cast eerie shadows, making the entire room look like a twisted surgeon's workshop.

Snobbit wrinkled her nose. "Ugh. This ain't a lab—it's a godsdamned butcher's den."

Hargin stepped forward cautiously, his boots crunching over scattered bone fragments. His grip tightened on his hammer as he eyed the large vats of thick, bubbling liquid on the far side of the room.

The liquid inside churned, something half-formed floating within—a writhing mass of flesh, tendrils, and bone.

"Some bastard's been experimentin' down here," Hargin muttered. "An' I don't reckon it was for the good o' science."

Snobbit moved toward a cluttered workbench, pushing aside rotting papers and empty vials. A leather-bound journal lay open, its pages stained with ink, blood, and something black and tar-like.

She squinted at the handwriting—erratic, barely readable.

"Got somethin'," she said, skimming the entries.

"The compounds are working. The flesh reshapes itself, adapting beyond natural limits. The vermin were easy to change—soon, larger subjects will be required."

"The first humanoid tests failed. Bodies melted, dissolved into useless masses of tissue. More refinement needed."

"The slimes absorbed their hosts too quickly. Necessary adjustments made. They must become weapons, not mindless hunger."

"Final stage soon. The city will see what true evolution looks like."

Snobbit frowned. "Some right mad genius shite in here."

Hargin exhaled. "Aye. An' it sounds like they weren't finished."

Then—a sound. A low, wheezing breath.

Hargin and Snobbit whirled, weapons at the ready. In the corner of the room, a figure slumped against the wall. A man—or what was left of him.

The man's body was broken, his skin pale and sickly, veins blackened and pulsing with some kind of unnatural affliction. His fingers twitched, his breath ragged and shallow.

One glazed eye flicked up at them, his lips parting.

"Too... late..." he croaked.

Snobbit crouched beside him. "Oi. Who did this? Who's runnin' this lab?"

The man shuddered, his gaze distant. "He's still here... waiting. Watching."

Hargin knelt down. "Who?"

The man let out a wet, rasping cough.

Then, his entire body seized.

Black veins bulged, his chest caving inward before something burst from his sternum—

A writhing, eel-like tendril, covered in rows of jagged fangs.

Snobbit jerked backward with a curse. "WHAT THE BLEEDIN' HELLS?!"

Hargin reacted first, swinging his hammer—the tendril screeched as it was obliterated, spraying thick, inky ichor across the floor.

The man's body spasmed violently, then fell still.

A horrid silence followed.

Snobbit clutched her chest. "That's it. I'm puttin' in for a new bloody job."

Hargin wiped his hammer against his sleeve, scowling. "Aye. An' we still ain't found the bastard responsible." Then— A slow clap echoed through the chamber.

A figure emerged from the shadows, half-hidden beneath a dark hooded cloak.

His face was sharp, his features gaunt, his skin tinged with an unnatural pallor. But it was his eyes—glowing with sickly yellow light—that made Hargin's blood run cold.

The man smiled. "Impressive," he said, his voice smooth as silk. "Not many survive an encounter with my work."

Hargin and Snobbit raised their weapons.

"Ye must be the mad bastard runnin' this show," Hargin growled.

The man tilted his head, amused. "Mad? No. Visionary." He gestured to the vats of churning flesh. "You stand before the next **step of evolution. Flesh and alchemy, merged into something... greater."

Snobbit scoffed. “Ye mean horrible an’ unnatural?”

The experimenter’s smile widened.

“You don’t understand yet,” he whispered.

Then—the vats behind him began to shift.

The liquid sloshed violently, bubbles rising to the surface—then bursting open.

And from within, monstrosities emerged.

Three creatures slithered forth from the vats—each a grotesque fusion of flesh, muscle, and bone.

One was half-human, half-slime, its torso still recognizable as a man—but its lower body a writhing mass of tendrils. Its face stretched in silent agony, eyes vacant, mouth distended in an unnatural scream.

The second had chitinous plating, multiple insectoid limbs sprouting from its shoulders and spine, its mandibles twitching hungrily.

The third was just... wrong. A mess of mouths, claws, and exposed nerves, its body shifting constantly, as though it couldn’t decide on its form.

Snobbit paled. “Okay. We’re definitely killin’ these things, right?”

Hargin rolled his shoulders, gripping his hammer.

“Aye,” he muttered. “An’ the bastard who made ‘em.”

The experimenter chuckled, stepping backward into the shadows.

“Then come, alchemist,” he whispered. “Let’s see what your craft is truly worth.”

The creatures lunged. And the fight for survival began.

The creatures lunged forward, their twisted bodies shifting and writhing, their movements unnatural, unpredictable.

Hargin barely had time to raise his hammer before the first abomination struck—the slime-fused monstrosity surged at him, its elongated arms morphing mid-air, turning into whip-like tendrils of acidic flesh.

He dove sideways, barely avoiding the lash that sizzled against the stone floor, leaving behind a smoking crater.

Snobbit had already darted into the shadows, moving with quick, precise steps.

The insectoid horror skittered toward her, its chitin-plated arms clicking together, serrated claws snapping hungrily.

She twisted her daggers, narrowing her eyes. “Alright, ye ugly bastard—let’s dance.”

Hargin rolled back to his feet, gripping his warhammer tight.

The slime-creature turned its glowing, soulless eyes toward him, its torso still vaguely human—a reminder that this was once a man.

It opened its mouth and let out a guttural, wet moan—then charged again.

Hargin planted his stance, lifting his hammer high.

The creature whipped out a tendril, but this time—Hargin was ready.

He ducked beneath it and swung upward—his hammer connecting with the abomination’s jaw.

The impact sent a sickening CRACK through the room, the thing’s head snapping back unnaturally.

But it did not fall.

Instead, its form liquefied, its head and torso shifting before reforming.

Hargin cursed. “Oh, bloody hells.”

The thing lashed out again, but he sidestepped, reaching into his satchel.

“Let’s see if ye like a bit o’ alchemy.”

He yanked out a vial of quicklime, smashing it directly onto the creature’s chest.

The reaction was immediate.

The slime boiled, its form twisting violently, its flesh hardening in patches where the quicklime took effect.

It let out a horrific shriek, stumbling backward as Hargin took the chance to raise his hammer high—

And he brought it down with all his might.

The half-solidified mass of the creature shattered, its body unable to reform in time.

The thing convulsed, twitched—

Then collapsed into a pile of broken, steaming sludge.

Hargin spat to the side. “Aye. That’s one down.”

Snobbit moved like a shadow, dodging the massive claw swipes of the chitin-covered monster.

It hissed, its mandibles snapping, attempting to grab her with its serrated limbs.

She twisted under one of its swings, darting forward and driving a dagger deep between the plating on its chest.

The creature screeched, staggering back—but it wasn’t dead.

She saw thick, black ichor oozing from the wound—but the flesh around it started to close.

Snobbit cursed. “Oh, that ain’t fair.”

The thing lunged again, but Snobbit was already moving—flipping over a rusted metal table, kicking it into the beast’s path.

The creature sliced through the obstacle, splinters flying—but that moment’s hesitation was all she needed.

Snobbit grabbed a throwing dagger—but this one was different.

A small rune glowed on the handle.

She grinned. “Time for a real trick.”

She flung the dagger, and the moment it pierced the monster’s throat—

The rune activated.

A pulse of explosive energy erupted from the blade, detonating inside the creature’s body.

The entire top half of the abomination exploded in a burst of gore.

Its legs twitched for a moment—then collapsed.

Snobbit flipped her last dagger in her palm. “That’s two.”

Hargin turned—only one creature remained.

The shifting mass of flesh and limbs had grown larger, its form struggling to hold a solid shape.

It let out a distorted, multi-voiced wail, its body twisting as it sprouted too many arms, too many eyes.

Alchemical corruption had taken it too far.

There was no saving it.

Hargin glanced at Snobbit. “Together?”

She smiled. “Aye.”

They charged at once.

Hargin swung high, smashing into one of the monster’s shifting torsos.

Snobbit darted low, slicing through the tendrils that tried to grasp her.

The thing lashed out wildly, screeching, its form melting and reforming uncontrollably.

Hargin pulled out a final vial—a concentrated combustion agent.

He shoved the vial into one of the beast’s gaping mouths.

“Swallow that, ye bastard.”

Then Snobbit threw another rune dagger—

It struck home—and ignited.

The creature erupted into a blinding inferno, its unnatural screams echoing through the lab as it burned from the inside out.

When the flames died down, all that remained was a charred, melted husk.

The battle was over.

Hargin and Snobbit panted, surveying the ruined lab, their bodies aching from wounds and exhaustion.

But the experimenter was nowhere to be seen.

Snobbit swore, kicking over a broken chair. “Hells! The bastard ran.”

Hargin exhaled, his fists clenching. “Aye. But he ain’t gone far.”

He turned toward the darkened hallway at the back of the lab.

A door was slightly open.

A tunnel beyond.

A way out.

Hargin rolled his shoulders. “We ain’t done yet.”

Snobbit wiped the blood from her cheek and grinned.

“Let’s go hunt us a madman.”

Hargin strode toward the open door, his boots crunching over scorched bone and broken glass. The stench of burned flesh still lingered in the ruined lab, but his focus was elsewhere.

The experimenter had fled.

Snobbit, still catching her breath, wiped her dagger clean on her sleeve. “So, we chasin’ ‘im, aye?”

Hargin nodded. “Aye. He don’t get to walk away from this.”

Snobbit grinned, flipping her dagger between her fingers. “Good. I was hopin’ to stab ‘im at least once.”

The tunnel beyond the door stretched into darkness, barely illuminated by the flickering alchemical lamps bolted to the walls.

They followed the path, moving quickly but cautiously, their footsteps echoing through the damp stone corridors.

Somewhere ahead, the experimenter was running.

And they would find him.

The deeper they went, the stranger the tunnels became.

The walls, once smooth-cut stone, began to change—becoming rougher, more organic.

Veins of dark green resin pulsed within the cracks, oozing a faint, phosphorescent glow.

Snobbit frowned. “Ye seein’ this?”

Hargin grunted. “Aye. More alchemical residue. Means we’re close.”

Then, they heard it.

A wet, skittering noise.

From the walls.

Snobbit froze, her hand darting to her belt. “Uh. Hargin.”

Hargin turned his head—and saw it.

A cluster of bulbous cysts clung to the stone, pulsing like living tumors.

And inside them—something moved.

Then, one of the cysts split open.

A horrid creature slithered free—a twisted cross between a centipede and a leech, its fanged mouth opening unnaturally wide.

More cysts burst, releasing a wave of horrors—dozens of mutated creatures, their eyeless heads snapping toward the intruders.

Then they rushed forward.

Hargin raised his hammer, swinging wide, crushing the first abomination in a spray of thick black ichor.

Snobbit spun sideways, hurling a throwing knife, impaling another through its open maw.

But they kept coming.

One of the creatures latched onto Hargin's arm, its fanged mandibles sinking deep.

He grunted, shaking it off, smashing it against the wall.

Snobbit ducked beneath a lunging horror, stabbing upward—her blade sank through the thing's skull, and it twitched violently before collapsing.

But the tunnel walls were splitting further, releasing more of the nightmare spawn.

“WE GOTTA MOVE!” Snobbit shouted, slicing through another attacker.

Hargin slammed his hammer into the tunnel floor, cracking the stone, creating a moment's gap in the swarm.

They sprinted forward, the creatures hissing and screeching behind them.

The tunnel narrowed, forcing them through a jagged passage—then, ahead, they saw it:

A heavy, rusted iron door, slightly ajar.

Beyond it, dim torchlight flickered.

Hargin shoved the door open.

And they stumbled inside—

The room was large, circular, lined with shelves stacked with alchemical notes, vials, and preserved horrors floating in jars.

At the center, standing beside an open sewer grate, was the experimenter.

He was breathing heavily, his cloak torn, his face smeared with sweat.

He had nowhere left to run.

Hargin raised his hammer, stepping forward. “End o’ the road, bastard.”

The experimenter laughed breathlessly, his glowing yellow eyes wild.

“You idiots,” he rasped. “You’ve no idea what I’ve achieved.”

Snobbit twirled her dagger. “Aye, well. Seems like it mostly involves makin’ monsters an’ ruinin’ the air quality.”

The experimenter gritted his teeth, stepping backward. “You call it monstrous. I call it progress.”

Hargin scowled. “Aye? Then what’s next? Turnin’ yerself into one o’ them?”

The man smiled—then held up a vial filled with shifting, dark liquid.

“Exactly.”

Before Hargin or Snobbit could react, the experimenter uncorked the vial—

And drank it.

His body convulsed violently, his veins blackening instantly, his skin rippling as if something beneath was trying to break free.

He screamed, falling to his knees, his fingers digging into the stone floor.

Then—his bones cracked.

His spine stretched, his limbs elongating unnaturally, his mouth splitting open into multiple mandibles.

His entire form bulged and shifted, muscle and bone reshaping into something beyond human.

Within seconds, the experimenter was gone.

In his place stood a towering abomination, its body a fusion of flesh, chitin, and tentacles, its eyes burning with raw alchemical energy.

And it roared.

Snobbit took a step back. “Oh, that ain’t fair.”

Hargin cracked his neck. “Aye. But we’re killin’ ‘im anyway.”

The creature lunged forward.

And the final battle began.

The creature that had once been a man loomed over them, its elongated limbs twitching unnaturally, its chitinous plates shifting, as if its body still hadn't settled on a final form.

Its multiple glowing eyes locked onto Hargin and Snobbit, burning with malice and hunger.

Then it moved.

Too fast.

A blur of grotesque limbs and snapping mandibles lunged toward them.

Hargin barely had time to raise his hammer before a massive clawed hand slammed into his chest, sending him hurtling backward into a shelf of alchemical supplies.

Glass shattered, strange liquids spilled, the scent of burning herbs and acid filling the air.

Snobbit darted left, rolling behind a rusted metal table, throwing a dagger mid-motion.

The blade buried itself into the monster's side—but the wound closed almost instantly.

Snobbit cursed. "Oh, that's a problem."

The creature let out a low, guttural growl, its mouth splitting open further, revealing row after row of serrated fangs.

It lunged at her—but Snobbit was faster, twisting out of reach, slashing at its exposed leg.

The blade bit deep—but the wound simply sealed over again.

Hargin groaned, shoving broken glass off himself, pushing up from the wreckage of the shelf.

His ribs ached, but he had no time to complain.

He grabbed a handful of vials from the mess, stuffing a few into his belt.

"Snobbit!" he bellowed. "We ain't killin' this thing with blades! We need to stop it from regeneratin'!"

Snobbit dodged another swipe, flipping over a broken chair. "Aye, I noticed! Got any bright ideas?"

Hargin grinned, pulling out a flask of white liquid. "Aye."

He uncorked it—the pungent scent of quicksilver and mandrake essence filled the air.

A powerful alchemical binding agent.

He hurled it at the creature.

The moment the liquid splattered against its torso, the reaction was instant.

The monster screeched, its flesh bubbling, its wounds refusing to heal.

Hargin gripped his warhammer, charging.

“NOW!”

He swung with all his might, bringing the full weight of dwarven steel crashing into the creature’s side.

A sickening CRACK echoed as the hammer shattered its carapace, sending black ichor spraying across the stone floor.

The creature stumbled, roaring, its movements sluggish, its regeneration halted.

Snobbit saw her chance.

She lunged onto its back, daggers flashing.

Her blades found purchase, stabbing deep into the exposed muscle beneath its chitin.

The creature howled, trying to shake her off, but she clung on, carving through its flesh, severing tendons and nerves.

Hargin gritted his teeth, lifting another vial.

A flask of alchemist’s fire.

“Let’s finish this,” he growled.

He smashed the vial directly into the creature’s open wounds. Fire erupted.

The alchemical flames spread quickly, crawling up the creature’s twisted body, engulfing it in hungry, unnatural heat.

The monster screamed—a high, keening wail that echoed through the entire sewer.

Its form convulsed, twisted—then collapsed.

Flames devoured it, turning its flesh into cinders, its twisted body writhing in its final moments. And then—silence. The beast was dead.

Snobbit rolled off the corpse, breathing hard. “Hells. That was a bastard.”

Hargin wiped blood from his mouth, stepping over the charred remains. “Aye. An’ we ain’t stickin’ ‘round.”

The fire had spread to the shelves, licking at the papers, notes, and remaining vials of alchemical compounds.

Smoke thickened, the air growing harder to breathe.

Snobbit stumbled forward, coughing. “We gotta move!”

Hargin grabbed her wrist, dragging her toward the open tunnel.

Behind them, glass exploded as chemicals reacted violently to the flames.

The entire hidden lab was coming apart.

They raced up the tunnel, the heat of the fire at their backs, the sounds of crumbling stone echoing through the passage.

And then—they saw the light.

The sewer exit.

With one final push, they burst out into the cold, night air—

Just as the lab collapsed behind them, sealing its horrors forever.

By the time they reached the Alchemist’s Guild, both of them were covered in blood, burns, and sewer grime.

The guild hall was still awake, alchemists pouring over notes, mixing compounds, tending to other members.

Alvaric was the first to notice them.

He took one look at their wrecked appearances, then sighed.

“I assume,” he said, crossing his arms, “that things did not go smoothly.”

Hargin grunted, dropping a burned vial of blackened ichor onto the table. “Ye could say that.”

Snobbit collapsed into a chair. “Experimenter’s dead. His lab’s burnin’. Sewer’s a godsdamned mess, though.”

Alvaric lifted the vial, studying it. “And the creatures?”

Hargin shook his head. “Not natural. Some bastard was forcin’ mutations. If there’s anythin’ left, it’s burnin’ with the lab.”

Alvaric exhaled slowly. “Good.” He eyed them both. “You’re both lucky to be alive.”

Snobbit grinned weakly, raising a hand. “And a little richer, aye?”

Alvaric sighed, rubbing his temple. “Yes, yes. Your payment will be arranged, 750 gold.”

Hargin cracked his knuckles. “Good. ‘Cause I need a stiff drink an’ a month’s worth o’ sleep.”

Hunger

The nights had become restless for Snobbit.

It had started with sleeplessness. She would toss and turn in her small cot in the upstairs loft of Hargin’s shop, her body tired but unable to rest.

Then came the hunger.

It was different from normal hunger—deeper, gnawing, insatiable. She ate loaves of bread, hunks of cheese, dried meats, even a whole roast chicken.

Nothing satisfied her.

Her stomach remained empty.

Her veins felt cold.

And when she looked at people passing by the shop, something inside her whispered.

Something dark.

Something hungry.

It was a late night, and Hargin was away on business at the Alchemist’s Guild.

Snobbit sat behind the counter, fingers tapping restlessly against the wooden surface, her breath shallow.

Then, the door creaked open.

A young woman entered—a commoner, dressed in simple woolen robes, a hood over her head. She smelled of lavender and warm candlewax.

She smiled. “Good evening. I need something for fatigue and headaches. My husband—”

She never finished her sentence.

The moment Snobbit smelled her scent, something snapped.

Her vision darkened.

Her teeth ached.

Her fingers curled into claws.

And before she could stop herself, she lunged.

The woman gasped, stumbling backward, but Snobbit was faster.

She grabbed the woman by the collar, dragging her forward, her mouth parting unnaturally wide—

And then she bit deep into her neck.

A warm rush of blood flooded her mouth, sweet and intoxicating.

The woman shuddered, twitching, her breath coming in weak gasps.

Snobbit drank.

And drank.

Until the body went limp in her arms.

Then, horror struck her.

She staggered back, her lips wet with blood, her hands shaking violently.

“No,” she whispered. “No, no, no, no—not me. Not me.”

But her reflection in the shop window told the truth.

Her pupils had darkened, her skin was deathly pale, and her teeth—

Her teeth were fangs.

Snobbit fled.

She bolted through the back alley, running as fast as she could—away from the shop, away from Hargin, away from what she had become.

And she ran to the only place she knew no one would find her.

The old mines.

The deep tunnels welcomed her like an old friend.

Snobbit crawled through the jagged stone, her fingers gripping the cold rock with unnatural strength.

She climbed higher, up the cavern walls, until she found a dark, hidden alcove—a tight crevice where the light would never reach.

Her breathing slowed. Her body curled in on itself. Her mind drifted. And she slept. Like a predator, waiting for hunger to return.

Hargin stepped through the front door of his shop, tired from the day's business.

Then he saw her.

The woman lay collapsed near the counter, her face pale as death, her neck marred by two small puncture wounds.

His stomach dropped. He knelt beside her, pressing two fingers to her neck—she was alive, barely. He saw the marks. He had seen them before.

“Damn it,” he muttered. “Not again.”

His gut twisted. This shouldn't be happening. The vampires of Helvar's bloodline were dead. Then a darker thought crept in.

“Snobbit.”

He searched the shop, but it was empty. He checked her room upstairs—nothing. Not a single sign of her.

For the first time in years, Hargin felt real fear.

The next day, after patching up the unconscious woman and sending her to a healer, Hargin began his search. He checked the Guild District, the Docks, even the Taverns where she liked to drink. No one had seen her. She was gone.

At first, he thought—maybe she left. Maybe she ran. But deep in his gut, he knew better. Something was wrong.

He marched to the Alchemist's Guild and stormed into Alvaric's chamber. Alvaric was studying a tome when Hargin entered, his brow furrowed. The moment he saw Hargin's expression, he closed the book.

“What happened?” Alvaric asked.

Hargin sat down heavily. “Snobbit's gone. An' I found a woman in me shop with bite marks.”

Alvaric's face darkened.

“She never fully turned,” Hargin continued, voice tight. “She got bit by Helvar, but she never showed signs. I thought she was fine.”

Alvaric exhaled slowly. “It's possible... the transformation was delayed. Some vampires can remain dormant—**weeks, months—**before it takes hold.”

Hargin rubbed his face. “So ye're tellin' me that all this time... she was just waitin' to turn?”

Alvaric nodded grimly. “It’s possible.”

Silence settled over them.

Then, Alvaric leaned forward. “She will be drawn to darkness now. To isolation. Newly turned vampires often seek cold, shadowed places to hibernate.”

Hargin clenched his fists. “Then I have an idea where she might’ve gone.”

Alvaric narrowed his eyes. “Where?”

Hargin stood up.

“The old mines.”

Alvaric wasted no time.

He gathered three experienced alchemists and sent a runner to the City Watch.

Within the hour, a small group was assembled—armed with silver weapons, torches, and vials of holy water.

Hargin strapped his warhammer to his back, stuffing anti-vampiric compounds into his belt.

“We find her,” he muttered. “An’ we bring her back. Alive.”

Alvaric studied him carefully. “And if she refuses to come back?”

Hargin’s jaw tightened.

“She won’t,” he said, though deep down—he wasn’t sure.

With a final nod, they set off.

And as they descended into the darkness of the old mines, Hargin felt one thing settle in his chest. Dread.

The old mines loomed ahead like the gaping maw of some ancient beast, swallowing the torchlight as Hargin and the search party descended into the cold, black tunnels.

The air was damp, heavy with dust and decay, and the deeper they went, the colder it became.

Hargin tightened his grip on his hammer, his gut churning with unease.

Snobbit was down here. Somewhere.

And she was no longer just Snobbit.

They had been walking for nearly twenty minutes when one of the City Watchmen—**a young recruit named Joran—**halted suddenly.

“Wait,” he whispered.

Hargin turned. “What?”

Joran pointed ahead. “There. On the wall.”

Hargin lifted his torch—and his stomach twisted.

A demonic sigil had been scrawled across the stone in what looked like dried blood.

Beneath it, claw marks had ripped deep into the rock.

Alvaric stepped closer, running a hand over the grooves. “Fresh,” he muttered. “She’s close.”

Hargin exhaled, his breath mist in the cold air.

“Aye,” he muttered. “Let’s keep movin’.”

They pressed forward, deeper into the forgotten tunnels, where the ceiling narrowed and the ground sloped steeply.

The silence was unnatural. Then—a sound. A faint scraping, like nails dragging against stone. The torches flickered.

“Hold,” Alvaric whispered.

The party stopped. The sound grew louder. Then—a blur of motion. Something dropped from the ceiling.

Joran barely had time to scream before clawed hands gripped his shoulders—and he was yanked into the shadows.

“JORAN!” one of the guards shouted, raising his crossbow—

A horrid crunching sound echoed through the tunnel.

Then silence.

Alvaric cursed. “It’s her.”

Hargin felt a tightness in his chest.

He turned toward the blackness ahead, his voice low and steady.

“Snobbit,” he called. “I know ye’re there.”

Nothing.

Then—a whisper.

A voice, distant, distorted by the echoes of the cavern.

“Go... away.”

Hargin’s fingers tightened around his hammer.

“We ain’t leavin’ without ye.”

The darkness shifted.

Then—she stepped forward.

She was barefoot, her small frame draped in shadows, her once rosy skin now a ghostly white.

Her golden halfling eyes had darkened, now burning with a faint red glow.

Her daggers were gone—replaced by long, sharp claws.

Blood stained her lips.

And her voice was not quite her own.

“I said,” she whispered, “go away.”

Hargin felt his heart clench.

This wasn’t just some vampire.

This was his friend.

“Snobbit,” he said, stepping forward. “It’s me. Ye know me.”

She twitched, her breath uneven.

“I don’t... want to hurt you,” she murmured.

Hargin swallowed. “Then don’t. Come back with us.”

Her eyes flickered.

For a moment—just a moment—he saw the old Snobbit in them.

Then the hunger returned.

She snarled. “I can’t!”

And she attacked.

Snobbit moved like a shadow, faster than any mortal.

Hargin barely had time to raise his hammer before she was upon him, her claws raking against his arm, tearing through leather and flesh.

He grunted, shoving her back—but she flipped effortlessly, landing on all fours like a wild beast.

One of the watchmen fired a bolt—Snobbit snatched it mid-air, snapping it in half without effort.

“Don’t,” she hissed.

Alvaric raised his hand, murmuring a binding incantation.

The moment the magical runes lit up, Snobbit vanished—then reappeared behind him.

She grabbed Alvaric by the throat, her strength inhuman.

“I said—DON’T.”

Hargin reacted instantly.

He grabbed a vial of holy water, hurling it at her.

The glass shattered against her arm—she screamed as her flesh burned, staggering back, releasing Alvaric.

Hargin stepped between them.

“Snobbit,” he panted. “Listen to me. This ain’t you.”

She clutched her burned arm, her breath ragged.

Tears welled in her bloodshot eyes.

“I... I don’t know what to do,” she whispered.

Hargin lowered his hammer.

“Then let me help ye,” he said. “Please, lass. Come back.”

Snobbit shook her head. “I can’t.”

Then—she turned and ran.

“AFTER HER!” Alvaric shouted.

The party sprinted through the tunnels, their torches flickering wildly as they pursued the fleeing halfling.

Snobbit was fast.

Too fast.

She climbed walls, leapt across rock formations, moving with inhuman grace.

Hargin's chest burned with exertion, but he pushed forward.

“SNOBBIT, STOP!”

Ahead, the tunnel split into two paths.

Snobbit turned toward the left passage—

And then screeched to a halt.

A group of figures emerged from the shadows.

More vampires.

They watched her curiously, their eyes gleaming like red-hot embers.

And then, their leader—a tall, cloaked woman with raven-black hair—smiled.

“Lost, little one?” she purred.

Snobbit staggered back.

Hargin and the party caught up, panting heavily.

Alvaric swore under his breath. “Hells. We’ve got company.”

The vampire woman’s gaze flickered toward them.

Her smile widened.

“How interesting,” she murmured. “Perhaps tonight is more eventful than I thought.”

She looked at Snobbit.

“You don’t belong with them anymore, child.”

Snobbit’s breath hitched.

Hargin felt his gut twist.

“Snobbit,” he whispered. “Don’t listen.”

But she was hesitating.

Torn between friendship and the hunger consuming her.

And the vampires knew it.

The woman extended a pale, delicate hand.

“Come with us,” she said. “You won’t have to fight anymore.”

Hargin took a step forward.

“Lass,” he said, his voice low. “Don’t do this.”

Snobbit stood frozen.

A choice lay before her.

And the next moment would change everything.

The tension in the tunnel was suffocating.

The vampire woman stood calmly, her hand still extended, her gaze locked onto Snobbit. Behind her, three more vampires waited in the shadows, their red eyes burning with anticipation.

Snobbit’s breath was shallow, her fingers twitching at her sides.

She was hesitating.

Hargin took a step forward, slowly, his hammer lowered but ready.

“Snobbit,” he said, his voice gentle but firm. “Ye know who ye are.”

Snobbit’s red-tinged gaze flickered to him, uncertainty flashing across her face.

The vampire woman let out a soft, knowing laugh.

“Oh, little one,” she purred, “you’re clinging to a past that no longer exists.”

Snobbit’s claws curled inward, her jaw tightening.

The woman tilted her head, studying her. “I can see it in your eyes. The hunger. The suffering. You’re trying to fight it. But why?”

She took a slow step forward.

“Come with us,” she whispered. “We’ll teach you how to embrace it. How to thrive.”

Snobbit stiffened.

Hargin saw the war raging in her eyes.

She was torn—between the past and the future, between loyalty and survival.

And then... she spoke.

“I...”

She swallowed, her gaze darting between the vampires and Hargin.

“...I don’t know what I am anymore.”

Hargin’s stomach clenched.

The vampire woman smiled. “Then let us show you.”

Snobbit’s fingers twitched.

Then, in a blur of movement, she turned and ran—straight toward the vampires.

Hargin swore.

“SNOBBIT, NO!”

But she was too fast.

The vampires stepped aside, letting her pass between them.

Then, the woman turned back to Hargin.

Her smile was pure mockery.

“Too slow, dwarf.”

And with that—the vampires vanished into the darkness, taking Snobbit with them.

The tunnel was silent again.

Only the distant echoes of footsteps remained, fading into nothingness.

Hargin stood there, his chest heaving, his fists clenched so tightly they shook.

“She’s... she’s gone,” one of the guards muttered.

Alvaric exhaled sharply, running a hand through his hair. “They won’t kill her,” he said, more to himself than anyone else. “They want to turn her fully. Train her.”

Hargin’s breath was ragged.

His closest friend. His apprentice.

Gone.

The same damn curse he thought they had ended—back again.

He turned toward the tunnel, glaring into the darkness, his teeth grinding together.

“Then we find her,” he growled. “An’ we bring her back.”

Alvaric placed a hand on his shoulder. “Hargin... we might not get her back.”

Hargin turned, his eyes burning with fury.

“Aye, we will,” he said.

“Or I’ll tear apart every vampire in this city until we do.”

The old mines fell into silence as Hargin stared into the darkness where Snobbit had disappeared.

The torches flickered. The remaining City Watchmen shifted uneasily.

Alvaric sighed, adjusting his belt where a row of silver vials clinked faintly.

“She’s gone, Hargin.”

Hargin’s grip tightened around his hammer. His knuckles turned white.

“No,” he growled. “She’s not gone. She’s just lost.”

Alvaric rubbed his temple. “You heard what she said—she doesn’t know what she is anymore. If those vampires get inside her head, if they make her embrace it...”

He trailed off.

Hargin whirled on him, eyes burning with fury.

“I ain’t givin’ up on her, Alvaric.” His voice was low, steady, dangerous. “Not now. Not ever.”

Alvaric studied him for a moment, then exhaled.

“Fine,” he muttered. “Then we need to start tracking them now.”

The search party spread out, sweeping the tunnels for any sign of where the vampires had gone.

One of the remaining City Watchmen—a seasoned hunter named Varik—knelt by the damp stone floor, his fingers brushing over something.

“Footprints,” he muttered. “Light. Quick. Leading west.”

Alvaric frowned. “West?”

Hargin’s brow furrowed.

“That leads deeper into the mines,” he said. “Past the old tunnels, toward the caverns.”

The City Watchmen shifted uneasily.

“The caverns?” one of them muttered. “You mean the collapsed ruins?”

Alvaric nodded grimly. “If I were a vampire looking for a lair, that’s exactly where I’d go.”

Hargin grunted. “Aye. Deep enough to hide. Cold enough for them to nest.”

He turned to the search party, eyes hard as iron.

“We move fast,” he said. “We don’t let ‘em settle. If we wait too long—”

He didn’t finish.

Because if they waited too long, Snobbit wouldn’t just be lost.

She’d be one of them. The deeper they went, the worse the air became. It wasn’t just cold—it was thick with something unnatural. A lingering, metallic scent. Blood.

Varik, still leading the group, suddenly stopped. He pointed to a wall of jagged stone, where a dark smear of crimson stained the rock.

“Fresh,” he muttered. “Someone was hurt.”

Hargin stared at it. The blood was small, precise. Like someone had bled, but not died.

He swallowed hard. “Snobbit.”

Alvaric stepped closer, narrowing his eyes. “Either they fed on her...”

“...or she fed on someone else,” Hargin finished, his voice like grinding stone.

He didn’t want to believe it. Didn’t want to imagine her teeth in someone’s throat again. But it had already happened once. And the longer she was with them, the more it would happen again. Hargin exhaled sharply, gripping his hammer.

“Then we pick up the pace.”

And they pressed forward—toward the collapsed ruins, toward the vampires’ nest.

Toward Snobbit.

Before it was too late.

The tunnel walls closed in around them, the jagged rock formations making it harder to navigate. The air grew stagnant, thick with the scent of blood and damp earth.

Torchlight flickered against ancient stonework—crumbling pillars, broken archways, remnants of a forgotten civilization buried beneath Mazruth-Kul.

The ruins.

A place where the dead had long claimed dominion.

Hargin gritted his teeth, his hammer heavy in his grip.

“Stay close,” he muttered. “We ain’t alone down here.”

Alvaric nodded, gripping a silver-lined dagger. The remaining City Watchmen moved cautiously, their crossbows loaded with silver-tipped bolts.

Somewhere ahead, beyond the collapsed structures and maze of tunnels, the vampires waited.

And so did Snobbit.

Varik, the seasoned hunter, knelt at the ground again, brushing his fingers over the dirt and dust.

“More tracks,” he whispered. “Leading deeper in.”

Alvaric frowned. “Still fresh?”

Varik nodded. “An hour at most.”

Hargin’s stomach tightened. She was close. Too close. Then—movement. A low whisper, echoing against the stone. The torches flickered.

One of the Watchmen whirled toward the sound, his eyes darting through the ruins.

“Did you hear that?” he muttered.

Hargin nodded slowly. “Aye.”

It had been her voice.

A cold wind rushed through the ruins, carrying words with it.

Hollow. Distant. Familiar.

“You shouldn’t have come.”

Hargin stiffened.

The others turned, weapons raised.

Varik muttered a curse. “Where is she?”

The voice drifted again, shifting between echoes.

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

Hargin exhaled sharply.

“She’s playin’ with us,” he growled. “Keep movin’.”

They pressed forward, passing through broken archways and fallen pillars, the ruins opening into a massive underground chamber.

And that’s when they saw it.

A vast cavern, its walls lined with hanging corpses—some fresh, some ancient, all drained of blood.

A pool of black water sat at the center, reflecting the torchlight with eerie stillness.

And beyond it, nestled between broken statues and crumbled altars, they waited.

The vampires. A dozen of them. And at the center of them all, standing beneath a cracked stone throne, was Snobbit. She looked different. Paler. Colder.

Her eyes gleamed with red hunger, her small form wrapped in a dark cloak. Her claws were bare. But her expression was not cruel.

It was pained.

Tormented.

“Hargin...” she whispered.

He took a slow step forward, ignoring the hissing vampires around her.

“Snobbit,” he said, voice steady. “It’s time to come home.”

Her claws curled inward, her breath shaky.

“I... I don’t know if I can.”

The vampire woman from before—the leader—smiled coldly.

“She is home, dwarf,” the woman murmured. “She’s one of us now.”

Hargin’s grip tightened on his hammer.

“No,” he said. “She ain’t.”

Then the woman lifted her hand—

And the vampires attacked.

The cavern erupted into chaos.

Silver-tipped bolts flew, striking vampires mid-leap, sending some screeching into dust.

Alvaric hurled a vial of holy fire, engulfing two in burning white flames.

Hargin swung his hammer wide, smashing through bone and sinew, sending a vampire crashing into the altar.

The Watchmen held their ground, but the vampires were faster, stronger—ravenous.

One of them tackled Varik, pinning him down, its fangs bared.

Before it could strike, a dagger flashed.

Snobbit.

She moved without thinking, her blade sinking deep into the vampire's neck.

The creature screeched, convulsed—then fell limp.

Hargin saw it.

A flicker of hesitation.

A moment of who she used to be.

“Snobbit!” he called. “Fight it!”

She turned to him, shaking.

“I... I don't know how.”

The vampire woman—her new master—hissed, stepping forward.

“You belong to us now, child.”

Snobbit's breath hitched.

Then she looked at Hargin.

And she ran to him.

The vampire woman's expression darkened.

“Foolish girl.”

She raised her hand, dark magic coiling around her fingers.

Alvaric reacted instantly, throwing a vial—a concentrated banishment elixir.

It struck the vampire in the chest, and she screamed, her form flickering, retreating into the shadows.

But the fight wasn't over.

Vampires still surrounded them, relentless, ravenous.

Hargin pulled Snobbit behind him.

“I got ye, lass.”

She gripped his sleeve, trembling.

“I'm... scared.”

He nodded.

“Aye. But ye ain't alone.”

Together, they turned back to the battle—

And the fight for Snobbit's soul truly began.

The cavern was a whirlwind of flashing steel, burning light, and the shrieks of the dying. The City Watch fought with grim determination, their silvered blades cutting through undead flesh, while Alvaric's alchemical fire cast unnatural shadows across the stone. Hargin moved like a force of nature, hammer in hand, crushing ribs, breaking spines, and sending vampires hurtling across the chamber.

Snobbit clung close to him, her breath ragged, her body trembling with conflicting instincts. She could hear the whispers in her mind, the hunger gnawing at her insides, urging her to turn against her friends, to sink her teeth into warm, pulsing flesh. But another voice—one that had guided her all her life—was screaming at her to fight. To resist.

A vampire lunged at her from the left, claws flashing. Without thinking, she ducked low, her dagger flashing upward in a precise arc. The silvered steel sliced through the creature's throat, severing its spine. The body convulsed before disintegrating into dust. She didn't stop to think about what she had just done. The moment her blade struck true, she knew where she belonged.

Hargin grinned as he saw her move with deadly precision. “There's the lass I know,” he called, swinging his hammer into the ribcage of another attacker. The bones shattered, the vampire gasping in shock before disintegrating. But there were too many of them. For every vampire they felled, another took its place, emerging from the shadows, fangs bared.

Alvaric threw another vial, the explosion of white fire consuming two more, but his supply was dwindling. The Watchmen were losing ground, their numbers dropping as the creatures

overwhelmed them. The vampire mistress had recovered, her dark form flickering across the battlefield, striking down men with cold, calculated efficiency.

Then, she turned her attention to Snobbit.

“You cannot run from what you are,” the woman said, her voice like silk over steel. “This fight is meaningless. You think they will trust you after this? You think you can return to the life you had? You are one of us now.”

Snobbit froze. The words struck deep, deeper than she wanted to admit. She had killed. She had tasted blood. Could she ever go back? Would she always feel this hunger?

Hargin, panting from exertion, stepped between them. “She ain’t yours,” he spat, gripping his hammer tighter. “Ye don’t own her.”

The vampire woman only smiled. “Then let’s see if she agrees.”

In an instant, she moved—faster than the eye could track—her clawed hand striking toward Snobbit’s chest.

Snobbit reacted on instinct, raising her dagger, but the vampire was too strong. The force of the blow sent her sprawling backward, crashing against the stone floor. Her vision blurred, pain exploding across her ribs. The hunger surged again, her senses sharpening, the smell of blood thick in the air.

The vampire mistress loomed over her. “Give in,” she whispered, crouching low. “You’re starving, aren’t you? You can feel it, can’t you? It won’t go away. Not ever.”

Snobbit swallowed, her mouth dry, her fangs aching. She could feel her body yearning to obey, to surrender to the darkness that had taken root inside her.

Then she heard Hargin’s voice, rough and unyielding. “Lass. Look at me.”

She turned her head. Hargin stood there, bruised, bloodied, and exhausted—but his eyes held only trust.

“Ye still got a choice,” he said. “No matter what she says. No matter what’s inside ye now. Ye decide who ye are.”

For a moment, time seemed to freeze.

Then Snobbit took a slow, steady breath—and made her choice.

She lunged, driving her dagger straight toward the vampire mistress’s heart. The silver blade pierced through her ribs, sinking deep. The vampire gasped, her red eyes widening in shock. Snobbit twisted the blade, her hands shaking, but she didn’t stop.

The vampire reached up, her fingers grasping at Snobbit’s arms, trying to pull away. But her strength was fading. She tried to speak, but only a ragged gasp escaped her lips. Then, with one last shudder, her body turned to dust.

The other vampires, seeing their mistress fall, hesitated. It was all the opening the Watchmen needed. They pressed forward, cutting down the remaining creatures, forcing them back. Within minutes, the fight was over. The nest had been destroyed.

Snobbit knelt where the vampire had fallen, her body shaking, her breath ragged. Hargin approached slowly, resting a hand on her shoulder.

“Ye did it, lass,” he said softly.

She looked up at him, her face pale, her fangs still visible. “I don’t feel any different,” she whispered. “I’m still... like this.”

Hargin sighed. “Aye. But ye made the right choice. That’s what matters.”

Alvaric wiped blood from his sleeve, stepping forward. “The transformation may not be reversible,” he admitted, “but you aren’t beyond saving, Snobbit. Your will is still your own. That means everything.”

Snobbit exhaled shakily and slowly nodded.

Hargin helped her to her feet, glancing around at the wreckage of the battle. Only a handful of Watchmen remained. The ruins were scorched, the bodies of the fallen littering the cavern floor. It had been a costly fight—but they had won.

The journey back to Mazruth-Kul was slow, and heavy with silence. Hargin walked alongside Snobbit, keeping a watchful eye on her. The battle had been won, the vampire nest destroyed, but Snobbit was not free. She still walked with an unnatural grace, her eyes still gleamed red in the firelight, and the hunger still gnawed at her insides.

Alvaric had wasted no time. Upon returning to the Alchemist’s Guild, he summoned the Grandmasters of the Order, those whose knowledge of ancient alchemy went beyond anything Hargin had ever studied. The guild’s sealed tomes—forbidden recipes and formulas dating back to the first alchemists—were brought forth.

If there was a cure, it would be found here.

For weeks, Snobbit remained in the Guild, undergoing grueling treatments, her body tested by fire, silver, and potion.

The Grandmasters worked tirelessly, boiling potions from ingredients lost to time—black lotus petals, ground dragonbone, essence of morning light, and vials of purified holy water. The process was painful—boiling elixirs poured over her skin, forcing the unnatural taint from her blood, alchemical fumes filling her lungs.

She burned with fevers that lasted for days, her body wracked with convulsions as the alchemical brews fought against the vampire’s curse. Sometimes she screamed, clawing at the wooden floor of her chamber, barely able to resist the urge to feed.

Hargin was there every day.

He brought fresh bread and hot stew, even when she couldn't eat it. He sat beside her, telling old stories, keeping her grounded in the world she was trying to stay part of.

"Ye remember when we scammed that ogre?" he grinned one night, watching her shiver under layers of blankets. "Still reckon that was the best foolin' we ever pulled."

She let out a weak chuckle, her voice hoarse. "Aye... he really thought those painted rocks were gold."

But some days were worse than others.

On one moonless night, she snapped.

The hunger overwhelmed her. She lunged at a guild apprentice, fangs bared, and would have drained him dry had Alvaric not been there to force a silver-drenched cloth into her mouth. She thrashed like a wild beast, until the Grandmasters chanted over her, forcing the darkness back into submission.

After that night, they chained her to the bed during treatment.

One evening, after nearly four weeks of treatment, Snobbit sat on the floor of her chamber, her wrists still red from the chains, her face hollow. Hargin sat across from her, chewing on his pipe, the ember glowing faintly in the dim light.

"I don't think it's workin'," she murmured.

Hargin exhaled, watching her carefully. "Aye, it is. Ye just don't see it yet."

She shook her head. "I still feel it. The hunger. It's always there."

"Aye." He leaned forward, resting his arms on his knees. "But ye ain't given in to it."

Snobbit swallowed hard. "I almost did."

"But ye didn't."

She looked away, frustrated. "Maybe I'm foolin' meself, Hargin. Maybe... maybe this is what I am now."

Hargin was silent for a long moment. Then he reached into his satchel and pulled out a small silver mirror.

"Look." He tossed it toward her.

She hesitated.

Her hands shook as she picked it up. For weeks, she had avoided mirrors. Avoided the truth.

Slowly, she lifted it.

Her reflection stared back at her.

She was pale, thinner than before, her eyes still held a trace of red, but there was something else.

Her own face.

Not a monster.

Not a creature of the night.

Just herself.

A tear slipped down her cheek, and she let out a shaky breath.

Hargin nodded. “Aye. Ye’re still in there, lass.”

The Grandmasters gathered in the deepest chamber of the Guild, where the oldest rituals were performed.

This was the final test.

A great stone basin had been filled with boiling liquid silver, mixed with the rarest purification elixirs. The scent of incense and burning herbs filled the air, and candles flickered, casting eerie shadows across the chamber walls.

Snobbit stood at the edge of the basin, wrapped in a white robe, her feet bare, her breath shallow. The hunger still gnawed at her, but it was weaker now, distant—a part of her, but not in control.

Hargin stood beside her. “Last step, lass.”

She nodded, though fear still shone in her eyes.

The Grandmasters raised their hands, their voices chanting in low, ancient tongues. The basin of silver shimmered, glowing with an unnatural light.

Then, Alvaric gave the final command.

“Step in.”

Snobbit took a breath.

And she stepped into the silver.

Pain erupted through her body, white-hot and searing. It felt like fire crawling over her skin, burning away the last traces of the vampire’s curse. She gasped, her fingers gripping the edge of the basin, but she did not scream.

She endured.

The silver burned away the darkness inside her, leaving behind only what was human.

When she finally stepped out, the last of the red glow in her eyes had faded.

She collapsed, barely able to stand.

Hargin caught her.

She blinked up at him, her voice barely a whisper.

“...Did it work?”

He smiled.

“Aye, lass. Ye’re free.”

A week later, Snobbit stood outside Hargin’s shop, breathing in the scent of the city air. It felt different now.

For the first time in months, she felt alive.

The hunger was gone.

She turned to Hargin, who stood beside her, arms crossed. “So,” she said, “back to business?”

He smiled. “Aye. Though maybe less blood in the shop this time.”

She chuckled. “No promises.”

For the first time in a long while, she felt like herself.

Snobbit the thief. Snobbit the alchemist’s apprentice.

Snobbit, not a monster.

And that was enough.